

## The Guns of August (and April, and May, and June, and .....) in Highland Park

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Have you ever gone for a peaceful stroll around the Highland Park Reservoir, only to be suddenly perturbed by the erratic sound of gunfire emanating from the Washington Blvd ravine? Or taken your kids over to the Farmhouse playground and tried to soothe their apprehension about all the explosions coming from down the hill? Or just started to relax on your back porch on a warm summer night, only to be jarred by an unexpected fusillade? Fear not. It's not the bad guys shooting, it's the good guys -- the City of Pittsburgh police officers, going through their firearms training. It is clear that our police officers must acquire and maintain their firearms proficiency. But why are they firing so close to a quiet residential neighborhood and a widely used -- and otherwise tranquil -- public park? Why would a city that is desperate to encourage people to live in its residential neighborhoods create such a noise nuisance? And what can a neighborhood group do when faced with such a situation? Therein lies an interesting bit of history about how the HPCC can recognize a neighborhood problem, and help to create an acceptable, albeit still imperfect, solution.

About 20 years ago, the City of Pittsburgh managed to add to its list of unique attributes an unintended first: the only major city in North America to build an open air firing range within earshot of a quiet residential area and a tranquil public park. The Pittsburgh Police Academy firing range is located a few hundred feet east of Washington Blvd, about half way up the hill that leads to the Shuman Center, and the Highland VA Hospital. The site was chosen for its proximity to the Police Academy Training Center on the west side of Washington Blvd (just north of the intersection of Negley Run and Washington Blvd.). However, a major blunder was made in designing the range: no noise analysis was ever conducted, and no noise-suppression methods were used in determining the location, orientation, or construction of the site.

Thus we have a open-air firing range located less than half a mile from Highland Park, producing sound levels in our neighborhoods that can exceed 60 to 65 decibels. Normal conversation is around 60 decibels, so that if you were having a conversation while the gunfire noise was at its typical level, you might not be able to hear what someone was saying, and of course, the gunfire

would continue in intermittent and unpredictable bursts for several hours.

By the late '80s, the use of the firing range was becoming a major nuisance. Firing hours were being scheduled not only during weekdays, but also late into the evening, on weekends, and even major holidays. Moreover, other law enforcement agencies, such as the FBI, the DEA, and the State Police, were being allowed to use the range, even though the City's liability with respect to usage by non-City employees was not well-understood. Repeated calls to the Training Academy by residents requesting some kind of reasonable constraints on hours of use were either ignored or rebuffed, with replies ranging from "we need to train our officers" to "tell it to city hall".

In June of 1989, the HPCC requested Mayor Sophie Masloff to (a) suspend or curtail use of the outdoor range; (b) explore alternative sites; and (c) conduct an environmental impact study. With the help of then-councilman Jim Ferlo, a "post-agenda" City Council hearing was held that included representatives from HPCC, City Council, and the Department of Public safety. We got quite a bit of media coverage on this issue, including some TV footage of several folks sitting on the back deck of a Bunker Hill home with the sound of gunfire from the firing range obscuring their conversation.

Our actions were fairly successful: Within a few days, the Deputy Director of Public Safety (Lou DiNardo) issued an order limiting firing hours to Monday - Thursday, 8:30 AM - 5:00 PM with "no exceptions". (However, it soon became clear to the Police Department that they also needed to practice during low light times, and thus there would have to be a few weeks every year when the range would be used after dark. These occasional "night fire" sessions remain, and may be the most intrusive aspect of the range, since they can run to 10 or 10:30 PM.) In addition, the City commissioned an independent acoustic consultant to take soundings throughout the neighborhood while guns were fired on the range<sup>1</sup>. His conclusion: "these intermittent noises of gunfire would tend to mildly annoy an average person."

For about 10 years, the Training Academy kept to the spirit, if not the letter, of the agreement, and the Mayor's office was supportive whenever the HPCC

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<sup>1</sup> The tests included standard police firearms: 38 cal with standard and +P loads, 9 mm automatics, 223 semiautomatic rifles, and 12 gauge shotguns with slugs.

complained of exceptions to the limited hours. But from the Training Academy's perspective, this was not an easy set of constraints. One problem was that the 5:00 PM stop time meant that officers on late shifts had to receive overtime pay to practice during the daylight hours. The Academy began to avoid this costly problem by using the "night fire" exception to schedule some sessions that began while there was still plenty of daylight. Occasional meetings were held between ad-hoc groups of Highland Park residents<sup>2</sup>, and various Training Academy Directors to remind them about the agreement that had been reached with the help of City Council and the Mayor's Office.

Over the years, most of the Training Academy Directors have been sympathetic and helpful. The current Director, Commander Paul Donaldson<sup>3</sup>, is committed to working within the Mon-Thursday, 8:30 - 5:00 limits, with the exception of two periods of night fire each year. The next one is scheduled from Aug 30 - Sept 2. As soon as future night fire schedules are known, Cmdr. Donaldson notify the newsletter editor.

But the present situation should not be viewed as a satisfactory long term solution. It is clearly counter-productive for the City to negatively impact the desirability -- and hence real estate values -- in a lovely neighborhood by continuing to operate the firing range as is. There are two possible solutions. One is to construct an indoor firing range that would provide an even better training facility, while eliminating the noise pollution. When this issue reached a head back in 1989, the Design Alliance prepared a design for a state of the art indoor range, with an estimated cost of about \$4M. Both the Police Department and the HPCC were in favor of this option, but it never got very far in the annual budget process, even though there are both state and federal monies that could be allocated to this project. More recently, the Act 47 process has suggested merging the City and County police training academies, which would allow the City to close its current range and use the County firing range in North Park. Perhaps the HPCC can propose other creative solutions that result in a win-win

situation, just as we did with the question of covering the Highland Park Reservoir.

Meanwhile, in the short run, if you hear firing outside of the agreed upon times, Monday-Thursday, 8:30 - 5:00, you should feel free to call the Training Academy to complain (412-665-3601). If you don't get any satisfaction, you can also call the Mayor's Service Center (412-255-2621). **Don't call 911**, as this is not an emergency issue, and they are not well informed about this problem<sup>4</sup>.

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<sup>2</sup> Many Highland Park residents participated in these efforts, including Lou DiNardo, Kate Elliot, Jim Ferlo, Volker Hartkopf, David Johnson, Vivian Loftness, Carol McNamee, Bill Rago, Tom Shorall, Erwin Steinberg, Tom Terpack, and Del Ziegler, among others. My apologies to others who also helped on this project, but whom I have failed to mention.

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<sup>4</sup> Note: names of responsible officers are no longer up to date: this article was written several years ago. The Mayor's hot line is now 311.