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Guardian Angels Return to London

Self-trained and Ready for Conflict, the Angels Take on Kilburn High Street

By

Mr. Hawk, Mr. Raven, Mr. Shaft, Mr. King and Mr. Walrus run through combat drills in a backstreet basement. Tall and short, lean and pudgy, each with varying accents and nationalities, they gasp heavily and sport fierce expressions.

Shaft, the veteran of the group, barks instructions with the authority of a drill sergeant. "When the back arches, you know they're in a lot of pain!"

I could swear that I have walked onto the set of a Hollywood movie complete with Tarentinoesque characters. But unless the studios of Tinseltown have moved to the seedier side of North London, what I'm witnessing is genuine.

The Guardian Angels are in training.

The group represents the London arm of a global network of volunteers who combat violent crime on city streets and subways. Following a leadership reshuffle a few years back that rendered them inactive, the Kilburn-based unit is back making the rounds. It lists 10 members and is vigorously recruiting more.

The organization was formed in New York twenty-five years ago by a McDonald's night-shift worker sickened by his neighborhood's crime. The idea was to fill a void left by policemen - to effectively mediate and deter assaults on impoverished city streets.

The cause in New York was justified, and eventually embraced by the likes of Mayors Giuliani and Bloomberg. The London chapter, in operation since 1985, has yet to achieve that status.

Although the Guardian Angels information pack says "An important part of GA patrol is liaison with local police," it is hardly the case in this city. The group's acting patrol officer Eduardo Salgado-Reyes, aka Walrus, readily admits "There is no relationship with the police. Some of them are friendly, some just ignore us."

What they cannot do is prevent the Angels from going about their business, as they are well versed on remaining on the right side of the law themselves. The training session focuses on when to intervene ("there must be a serious and immediate risk of injury") and how ("the first rule is identify yourself"). Crucially for Angels, their system preaches street-fighting techniques that protect both themselves and an attacker.

During one simulated exercise Shaft yanks Raven, who is twenty centimeters taller, with enough force to pull him to the ground while ensuring his head is cushioned by Shaft's chest. I cannot help but visualize the same event occurring on a Friday night Northern Line journey, replacing Raven with a drunken yob fixated by a young woman showing too much flesh.

The Angels appear keen to protect attackers as well as those in trouble, if only for their own legal standing. "If you use something that applies pain, pressure and control, you can explain it better in front of the magistrates," Shaft clarifies to his soon-to-be hardened recruits. The training works. Aside from a case thrown out of court ten years ago, the Guardian Angels have stayed out of legal trouble.

This is not to say they have the blessing of the police. "Yes, of course I know who they are" says a spokeswoman for Camden Police, whose jurisdiction Kilburn falls under, before delivering an official line: "Obviously we do not support vigilante groups in any way shape or form, but anybody helping with intelligence on crime is welcome."

What the Guardian Angels don't do, however, is gather intelligence, preferring to operate against crime that is spontaneous and often carried out by the poor on the poor.

"The one thing that all these so-called tough areas have in common is poverty and deprivation," says Shaft, whose real name is Sedleigh Adams. On a patrol through Kilburn High Street, wearing the Angel's unmistakable cherry-red beret over his tightly cropped afro, he says "Camden is a very large borough with poverty and extreme wealth. We came to Kilburn because we were invited (by an established Latin American association) and because of the widening ethnic mix."

Walrus goes a step further. "The police are meant to enforce the law and protect people and that doesn't always work at the grassroots level," he says. "We offer reassurance. Most youth see the police as the enemy - that's the problem we face today in Britain."

But there is no guarantee that the public consider these men friends either. As I join them on patrol around Kilburn, the responses range between joy, curiosity and revulsion. No matter what they illicit a reaction.

"I'm embarrassed to even see them," says an annoyed muscular black man unchaining his bike, "We shouldn't have volunteers coming through. Somebody who's getting paid in a government office to do his job is not doing it."

A delicately dressed woman in her forties walking with her mum says, "In principle it's a good idea, but my worry is whether these people are properly trained to combat crime." When I explain that the Angels carry out a rigorous training scheme, her response is pithy: "Yeah, so does the army and we've seen what they've been up to."

A young couple in an SUV park near their home on one of the quiet tree-lined streets. They smile and wave at the Angels as they pass.

A gay man in his mid-thirties goes frantic. "We need somebody to protect us, because the police don't do anything - nobody's doing anything. It's always the criminal in the right. I was mugged and nearly murdered!"

Indian shopkeepers at a small grocery smile but have no idea who these guys are.

We come to a group of young patrons outside a popular bar on Kilburn High Road. One of them begins a verbal spar with Shaft, challenging him on his intentions.

"You are putting yourself on the frontline," says the slick talker.

"Everyone is on the frontline," replies Shaft.

A crowd sporting fresh club gear develops; they lean in to hear the conversation.

"Why don't you just join the police?" asks the slick talker. It is a fair question.

Shaft says it is wrong to carry weapons (even batons), a tactic against the Angel's code of ethics. He adds that police often handle a situation insensitively, especially in low-income areas.

The gatherers contemplate his answers. Some nod while others shake their heads. There are indeed more reasons why these able men do not earning a living in law enforcement, and it begins with their own careers.

Shaft is a full-time projects manager for British Airways. He also operates his own record label. If he handles all his work with the same passion that he uses to teach street fighting, he must be exhausted every single night.

Simply put, these men want to be Guardian Angels; it is the forum in which they can help people most effectively within the confines of their busy lives.

"It's not just an organization, it's a brotherhood," says 20 year old Paul Copeland, aka Raven. "These colors mean a lot more than 'We are here to save lives.' It runs quite deep."

Raven runs his own graphics design company in Stevenage, where it takes him an hour to return after a night's patrol in London. A martial arts enthusiast who was searching for further training, he spotted an online ad for the Angels and contacted them in July. After an exam he described as "five hours of hell" Raven received his badge as a fully-initiated member in April.

"The first time you see the look in someone's eyes when they've needed you, it makes it all worthwhile," he says. "They know nothing else is going to happen to them. It's the whole point of the Guardian Angels."

Chilean-born Walrus (the least sculptured of the lot) graduated in 1996. He is the legal case worker for the Latin American association during the day and a qualified interpreter.

Years ago when the Angels were based in King's Cross, Walrus says they would break-up fights on a nightly basis. "Sometimes we wouldn't have to do anything besides announce our presence and they would run," he recounts. "Most criminals are cowards and they knew who we were."

Seventeen-year-old Fabianne lacks a street name. Gangly and sporting soft facial hair, he looks out of place during combat drills. A recent immigrant from Venezuela, Fabianne is just picking up English. One wonders whether street fighting in Kilburn might be too much for him to handle.

"My parents think I'm too young to be doing this," he says via the interpreter Walrus, "but I want to graduate and get my colors."

Surely London streets must be safe enough to do without protection from teenagers and professionals. We stroll around Kilburn for nearly an hour and there is not a sign of hostility. The patrol seems more like a gesture to me than a necessity. By 11pm, the Guardian Angels call it a night and head towards Kilburn Park station.

I go the opposite way, looking for a late-night snack. Something strange happens. Almost immediately Kilburn High Road turns sinister. Across the street, a group of youths in front of a kebab shop push and shove one another. Among them, a rowdy female looks at me and yells "fucking immigrant."

Eager to vacate the area, I walk a few blocks to my car. The backstreet I've parked on is overtaken by flames and smoke from a burning Volkswagen. The smell of toxins is unbearable. It may have been faulty wiring. It was probably arson. There are no police in sight.

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