

Arm the Homeless

Originally published April 1, 1999 in the Phoenix New Times.

BY DAVID HOLTHOUSE

Manny Marco, unemployed vagabond, tenderly loaded the last of 30 9-millimeter bullets into the spring-action, extended clip for his new Mac-10—a semiautomatic assault weapon capable of throwing rounds as fast as Marco can blink.

"That's very good, Manny," coaxed Arm the Homeless firearms instructor Pete Whippit. "Now, insert the clip and rack that lever there." Marco did so, producing the wicked, unmistakable *chik-chik* of a freshly loaded weapon.

"Okay, Manny," Whippit continued, pointing to a switch. "Now, all you need to do is flick this thing here from 'Safe' to 'Fire,' and you are cocked, locked and ready to rock."

Tears of joy trickled through the caked grime on Marco's face as he threw both arms around Whippit, still holding the fully loaded machine pistol. Nearby, a cluster of vagrants sorting through a shopping cart filled with handguns and shotguns ducked and danced away from the arc of the Mac-10's barrel.

"God bless you, and God bless Arm the Homeless," Marco said. "This is the nicest thing anyone's done for me in 10 years."

With that, Marco withdrew from the embrace and shook the Mac-10 menacingly at a reporter.

"Beats the hell out of a little spare change, don't it?"

The proud new gun owner slid the Mac-10 into a Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles backpack, which he latched over a soiled bed roll. He waved goodbye, then set out across the desolate, dry bed of the Salt River, his course set for the corporate towers of downtown Phoenix, two miles away. Marco said he spends most afternoons there, panhandling near the Valley National Bank building.

"That man is going to rest easier tonight because of the gift we bestowed upon him today," said Whippit, his eyes shielded behind military surplus mirror shades. "Not only did we give Manny the peace of mind that comes with carrying a weapon. We also gave him the sense of self-respect due any man who exercises his God-given, Constitutional right to keep and bear arms."

"Just because someone is homeless, doesn't mean they don't need a gun—quite the contrary," Whippit continued. "That's what Arm the Homeless is all about—making sure any American who wants a gun has one, whether they can afford it or not."

On March 25, Whippit and five other Valley gun activists calling themselves Arm the Homeless distributed free, legal firearms to 76 homeless men and women during a three-hour giveaway on the Salt River bed.

The action—technically a series of transfers between private citizens—was completely legal under Arizona's loose gun laws (Arm the Homeless required all firearm recipients to sign a form stating they are not convicted felons).

Appropriately, most of the weaponry—which included eight .357 magnum revolvers, at least five .38s, two .44s, dozens of 9mm, .45, .25 and .380 caliber semiautomatic pistols, a few Luger .22s, and high-capacity arms such as the Mac-10, seven Tec-9s, and one SKS assault rifle—was kept on-site in a shopping cart, from which the homeless literally chose their weapon.

The giveaway was staged in a secluded patch of wasteland beneath the Central Avenue Bridge. Honey Hawk, the gun group's "minister of information," said the event was promoted solely through word of mouth, on a "classified, need-to-know basis."

"Basically, we planned the operation, then established contact agents within the downtown Phoenix homeless population, through which we disseminated the time and place specifics," she said.

The giveaway was first-come, first-armed, and began at high noon. As the vagrants arrived in ragged bands, two Arm the Homeless organizers secured them into groups of five in a holding area cordoned off with rope in the shadow of one of the overpass' concrete supports. The shopping cart of guns was on the opposite side. Whippit escorted each group in turn to the "arming zone," where they sat on the ground for a 15-minute lecture from Arm the Homeless instructors, who skimmed over the basic principles of firearm safety, then identified and explained the pros and cons of the four types of guns available—revolver, semiautomatic pistol, shotgun and assault rifle.

"Now, the SKS assault rifle is not a carry-down-the-street kind of weapon," Whippit said during one lecture. "It's a camp weapon. It's a keep-it-in-your-sleeping-bag-by-the-fire weapon. The SKS is ideal for defending an established position."

After the lecture, each group of five was instructed to make a selection from the shopping cart, with a 10-minute time limit on browsing.

Cat, 43, a member of the first group, immediately seized upon a Mossburg 500 shotgun, which came with a box of Milstor shatter disc rounds—each Milstor shell is packed with a stack of 15 dime-size metal discs, perforated in quarters to detach upon barrel exit.

"I want this one!" Cat said.

"That's a lot of gun for a little lady," one Arm the Homeless volunteer told her. "How about this, instead?"

He reached into the cart and pulled out a silver, Colt .380 that fit into his palm. "This is what we call a purse gun. It might be more your type."

"I don't have a purse!" protested Cat. "I want the scatter gun!"

"Let her have the damn shotgun," Whippit directed. "We've got people to arm."

Whippit, 33, is a Marine Recon combat veteran who says he saw action in the 1989 Mongol-Sumerian conflict. After Whippit left the Marines in 1992 (records indicate an honorable discharge), he says he fought as a paid mercenary with the Mau-Mau Liberation Front in several west African tribal wars. Whippit followed a girlfriend to the Valley about a year ago, and now lives in east Mesa, where Arm the Homeless is based.

"Once I got here, I decided to use the money I made as a hired gun fighting for causes I didn't believe in to fund an organization fighting for one I do," said Whippit. "I found a few like-minded individuals, and we started having meetings and acquiring guns."

Whippit says Arm the Homeless accumulated its stockpile of weapons through numerous, scattered purchases at Valley area "cash and carry" gun shows, where private, small volume dealers are not required to register sales, and handgun buyers can avoid the background checks mandated by the 1993 Brady Bill.

Arm the Homeless spent more than \$25,000 on the guns, Hawk says, not including the SKS, Mac-10 and three Tec-9s, which ATH members donated from private collections she characterized as "extensive."

Arm the Homeless, which is a 501c4 tax-exempt organization, has also received more than \$10,000 in direct cash donations from Second Amendment fanatics—much of that generated through the group's Web site: www.armthehomeless.com.

"All the weapons we're giving away are used weapons, but they're good used weapons," Hawk said. "There's not a Saturday Night Special in the lot."

Arm the Homeless could have provided each gun recipient with more than one box of ammo, she said, but "we didn't want them selling bullets for booze."

Also, Hawk said, two days before the giveaway, Arm the Homeless mailed a letter to every address listed under "Pawnbrokers" in the yellow pages. The communique informed pawn shop owners of the group's action, and asked them not to purchase any weapons from homeless people.

"We thought this thing through," Hawk said. "We didn't just come down here and start handing out guns. This is not some haphazard distribution of dangerous weaponry. This is a well-organized political and social service action."

Bob Dobbs, director of the Downtown Business Interest Protection Committee for the City of Phoenix, said the gun giveaway "sounds like somebody's idea of a sick joke."

"What do these gun crazies think they're going to accomplish with this idiocy?" he asked. "I mean, do they have any idea how much damage this will do to Phoenix's reputation? Would you want to visit a city where the homeless are being given guns? This is catastrophic. So much for revitalizing downtown."

Dobbs said he planned to advise Mayor Skip Rimsza to declare an emergency and call for the passage of an ordinance to require all Phoenix gun owners to have a legal mailing address, other than a homeless shelter.

"At least a P.O. Box," Dobbs said. "I mean, sweet Jesus, is that too much to ask of someone with a loaded .44?"

Meanwhile, Terrence "Skip" Towne, a disgruntled former member of Arm the Homeless, has begun a campaign to discredit the organization.

"Arm the Homeless—hah! What a bunch of crap. I call it Arm the Whole Mess," snarled Towne, formerly Whippit's right-hand man in the group.

Towne, who lives in Surprise, said he initially was taken in by Whippit's combat stories, which he has since begun to doubt.

"I think Whippit's a fascist fruitcake whose real agenda is to get rid of the homeless. I think he hopes they all shoot each other, which they probably will," Towne said.

Whippit says he expelled Towne from the group in January for misuse of weapons.

"Every Friday night, like clockwork, Skip would snort a bunch of bathtub speed, load about 50 of our guns into his truck, and disappear into the desert. He'd burn through 500 bucks of ammo a weekend, easy. He had to go."

Commander Guy Armstrong, head of Sheriff Joe Arpaio's Homeless Posse, says none of his volunteer patrolmen, who are themselves homeless, have seen evidence of more firearms among the street people.

Asked if he is concerned about the prospect of encountering armed homeless, Armstrong shrugged and said, "Not really. We've got guns, too."

A reporter who'd been invited to cover the giveaway asked Hawk if distributing guns to the homeless might lead them to rob and shoot people. She fired this sarcastic retort: "I think that question reflects your prejudice. Let me guess—homeless people are all criminals or crazy, and shouldn't be able to own guns. Yeah, that's real enlightened." Hawk brandished a sheet of crime statistics indicating that people who live on the streets are 10 times as likely to become victims of violent crime as people who don't.

"These people need guns," she said. "It's not their fault our cities aren't safe, and it's not fair to deny them the right to protect themselves in a dangerous environment, just because they're poor."

She pointed to 74-year-old WW II veteran Gabo "Pops" McClean, who had just claimed a gleaming black Tec-9. McClean assumed a firing position and pretended to pull the Tec-9's trigger, rattling the weapon with both hands and rolling his tongue behind his teeth to make machine gun noises.

"I'd sure like to see some skinhead punks try to set him on fire tonight," Hawk said. "Gabo there looks like he's ready to go Charles Bronson on their ass."

As an Arm the Homeless instructor showed McClean how to conceal the Tec-9 on a shoulder sling beneath his tattered windbreaker, Hawk admitted that the homeless gun recipients probably do not have permits to carry concealed weapons in the state of Arizona.

"I doubt if many of them have the money to afford the 16-hour class and permit fees," she said. "Which is just another example of how, when it comes to guns, this country discriminates against its so-called 'second-class citizens.'"

Hawk said Arm the Homeless hoped to recruit a Department of Public Safety certified firearms instructor to conduct concealed-weapons permit classes for the homeless.

"If they donate their time, we'll come up with the permit money and do our best to round all [the homeless] up and get 'em back here for a CCW class, so they can legally carry concealed."

"Obviously, it's not as big a problem with the SKS and the shotguns, unless they get their hands on a hacksaw.

"In any case, we consider what these people do with the guns after they get them to be their business. Our business is to make a forceful statement in support of the Second Amendment, and that statement is that when guns are only for people with homes, only people with homes will have guns."

As if to punctuate Hawk's point, a rapid-fire pop-pop-pop volley of shots rang out from 100 yards away, where homeless gun recipient Habbie "Abe" Rafuls was busy emptying the pre-ban, 15-round clip of his newly acquired Smith and Wesson 9mm. Rafuls whooped as he pumped an old mattress full of lead. "Seeing that gives me a warm feeling inside," Whippit said.

He grabbed the sleeve of a passing Arm the Homeless member and pointed to Rafuls, just as the man fired his last bullet into the ground. The ricochet kicked up a spool of dust and sang off into the distance. Rafuls began spinning circles, repeatedly pulling the trigger on a spent clip.

"Go ahead and give that man another box of ammo," Whippit ordered. "Let's make his day."

At press time, Arm the Homeless announced a second firearm giveaway, to take place in the America West Arena plaza on Friday, April 2, starting at 5:30 p.m. (one half hour before tip-off of the Phoenix Suns vs. Los Angeles Lakers basketball game). For volunteer information or to donate a firearm, call Arm the Homeless at 440-1136.