

Title: Meet Mr. Murder, An interview with Vernon Geberth.

Introduction: By the late 1980's Lt. Commander Vernon Geberth was viewed as legend by detectives at the NYPD, as well as a thorn in the side by the department's hierarchy. During my last two years as a detective in the NYPD I was assigned to the 108<sup>th</sup> Precinct in Queens, and worked "off the chart" exclusively on homicides. The 108 is a mixed residential, commercial, and industrial area that was separated from Mid-Town Manhattan by the East River. We never had more than 40 homicides in a year, but working "off the chart" gave me the opportunity to get involved with a lot of homicides. At least I thought it was a lot until speaking with Mr. Geberth. While the NYPD is one department, the Bronx and Queens could have been thousands of miles apart when it came to sharing operational methods and techniques during that period of time.

Mr. Geberth sought to change the self-promoting "why should I tell anyone else how I do it" attitude held by many detectives into an unselfish team concept where everyone learns from each other. Today, Vernon Geberth is still actively involved with homicide investigations, and the education and training of detectives on a national, and international scale through his company **P.H.I. Investigative Consultants, Inc.**, and his **Practical Homicide Investigation® seminars**. He has gone from legend at the NYPD to Icon. He is a Cop's Cop. A quintessential New Yorker, Mr. Geberth has a quick sense of humor and a real dedication to the victims and their families. One sentence stuck out in my mind as I visited his website at [www.practicalhomicide.com](http://www.practicalhomicide.com) "**Remember, We work for God.**"®

It was an honor to meet with him, and to be able to bring you some insight into this very complex and dedicated man.

Warren J. Sonne

Associate Editor for Law Enforcement

Q Vernon, your name is synonymous with homicide, in fact many of us in the investigative community have come to think of you as "Mr. Murder." How did you get your start?

A One thing I always had in my heart was a desire to be a NYC cop. When I got to Iona College everybody else was going into Business, they didn't even have a Criminal Justice program at Iona in those days. In my 3<sup>rd</sup> year I had to pick a Major and the guidance counselor called me in and asked, "Geberth, have you chosen a Major yet?" When I told him I was going into the NYPD he began to yell, "NYPD? NYPD? This is Iona College, a Business School!!!" I said, "Calm down, Brother, it's a Vocation for me, as a Brother you must know all about Vocations."

Q. Iona is a Catholic School?

A. Yes, and many of the instructors were Irish Christian Brothers.

Q. So, you left school for the NYPD?

A. Yes. And while in the police academy, I heard about this special unit, TPF or Tactical Police Force. I was in the top five of my graduating class and luckily for me, I was one of 10 people from that Academy Class chosen for the TPF. One thing I noticed was that everyone else in TPF was over 6' tall, and I was the runty little guy. But someone must have thought that I had the brains to make a contribution there.

Q. Were you ever assigned as a uniformed officer in a Precinct?

A. No. I never worked in a precinct until I became a detective. TPF was a special unit that would come in, whether it was a riot, or to patrol a high crime neighborhood, and our job was to make arrests. If we stayed active we were almost guaranteed a promotion. In 2 ½ years I became a detective and did short stints in Narcotics, Precinct Detective Squad, Robbery and then a street crime type unit. I never had an opportunity to work in a homicide unit as a detective, but I got a taste of what it was like to work murders as a precinct detective. Once I got promoted to Sergeant I was sent back to Uniform for the "Cleansing Process." We (police) are the only operation in the world that trains people to be good at a certain assignment, and then when they get to that point of being promoted we sent them back to start all over again instead of going forward.

Q. But you did get into Homicide at some point.

A. Eventually I got into Homicide as a Detective Sergeant and ended up in the 7<sup>th</sup> Homicide Zone, the busiest Zone in the City with over 225 homicides within a 2-½ square mile area of the Bronx. It gave me an opportunity to really get involved in the cases, because unlike the detectives I did not have to make arrests, go to Court, Grand Jury, or do the hundreds of other things that detectives have to do.

Q. As a detective sergeant you had the ability to oversee the cases, rather than having the responsibility of doing the paperwork, making arrests, and doing the hundreds of other little things that detectives get involved with?

A. Right! I could see each case through. I could go down to the autopsies. I could put stuff together and I began to formulate a protocol procedure that would work. And every time that we had a success I'd call a team meeting to discuss how the case broke. What did we do? How did we do it? At first there was resistance from some of the older detectives. "If we tell other teams how we broke the case then they'll do the same thing!" And I'd say, "Yeah, right! That's the whole point. We're supposed to learn from each other!"

I had already obtained my Bachelor's degree from Iona College, and had completed my first Masters degree, in Professional Studies for which I had to do a thesis. I decided to research my own job. That's how "Practical Homicide" started. I began to codify the procedures that were effective and wrote articles for Law and Order Magazine.

Q. Wasn't there a "Detective Guide" or manual already in existence at the NYPD?

A. There was a "Guide" that told you what forms to use, or how to make notifications, take a day off. It was a "guide" that told you how to do everything except how to solve a crime. Meanwhile, I began writing articles for a law enforcement magazine and I started getting some positive feedback. In 1979, the NYPD sent me to the FBI National Academy and I took every "Death Investigation" course they had to see what they knew. It was quite apparent that they knew nothing about homicide investigations from an operational standpoint. They had other people's photographs and their stories. The bottom line was that the people who "worked" the street had the information, and that's when I decided to write a book that would include the FBI's forensic procedures that I felt were good, but not their tactics because they didn't really have any.

Q. How long did it take you to write the book?

A. A little over six years to produce the textbook called Practical Homicide Investigation: Tactics, Procedures and Forensic Techniques, 1<sup>st</sup> Edition. The first thing that happened was I got into trouble with the NYPD. As their investigation began they wanted to know, "By whose authority did you write a book?" I tried to tell them that it was the "1<sup>st</sup> Amendment," but they didn't think that was very funny. Fortunately, the FBI was part of the book, and the Police Commissioner at the time thought that I had made a major contribution to the field. Also, the book didn't make any money, so the NYPD dropped the investigation. The book wasn't about making money, it was about writing a book on how to do Homicide Investigations.

Q. Well, now that the book was written, and since it didn't make any money, what made you go on?

A. Because I believe in what I do. The first thing I did when I retired from the NYPD, was write the 2<sup>nd</sup> Edition in 1990. I put in everything that they told me I couldn't put into the 1<sup>st</sup> Ed. Then, after watching the O.J. Simpson Trial and seeing both sides waiving my book at each other... I became a spokesperson for "Inside Edition." Once a week I would comment on the O.J. case. It pissed me off because it kind of brought me into the case. I would have to watch and read about everything that was going on so I could intelligently respond to the issues. Actually, when that verdict came in I felt like I had suffered a loss. This guy was guilty, pure and simple. There was more evidence in that case than you could shake a stick at. But, it motivated me to write the 3<sup>rd</sup> Edition, and that's where we are today. I wrote the 3<sup>rd</sup> Edition specifying why O.J. Simpson did it, but more importantly I brought the book up to speed with the forensic procedures, and today the book is the International protocol.

Q. Vernon, in a perfect world only guilty people would be arrested and convicted but the reality is different. What advise would you give to private investigators who handle death cases for the defense?

A. I personally handled a defense case as a private investigator for a former prosecutor, who had become a defense attorney. The accused had been charged with murder based upon an alleged confession and witness statements. The first thing I did was request the complete police file, which had been turned over to the defense through discovery. It was my opinion that the confession was bogus based upon my experience with murder confessions and police vernacular. Upon reading the statements provided by the so-called eyewitnesses it was apparent that there was something wrong with both the times and circumstances. I reconstructed the event, based upon my own time-line and found a major discrepancy in the State's case. The time of death was wrong and the statements of the witnesses were contrived to protect the real suspect. Furthermore, the police had written the defendant's confession based upon their interpretation of the scene, which did not match up with the reconstruction or the physical evidence that had been analyzed.

Basically, the truth was discovered in the file, which consisted of independent police reports filed by officers who had not obtained the confession as well as the forensic reports, which matched my crime scene reconstruction. During the trial we identified the real perpetrators as well as their motivation, which had nothing to do with lust murder. The crime scene had been staged as a sexual event when in reality it was jealousy and revenge.

Q. Vernon, you've been doing this for quite some time now. What's the most significant change you've seen in homicide investigations?

A. I've been at this for about 35 years now, and undoubtedly the answer is forensics! I look at the O.J. case and say that he got away with murder, but you know, the handling of the evidence in that investigation could have been better. Because some of the evidence was not handled, as it should have been it raised issues that the defense was allowed to attack, and blow smoke at. That was a "wake-up call" for all law enforcement that forensics, and the way you handle the evidence is very important. I travel around the country with my Practical Homicide course, and O.J. is only one case. The sad part is that it happens every day, those mistakes. You don't hear about it because it's not a publicity case. This current Scott Peterson case is like a breath of fresh air. In O.J. there was an abundance of physical evidence that a jury chose to ignore, in Peterson's trial there was a scarcity of physical evidence, yet the jury convicted based on the overwhelming circumstances of the event.

Q: What are some of the most common ways that people attempt to make murders appear like suicides?

A. The most common methods of "Staging the Crime Scenes" are to make a murder appear to be a suicide. Placing a gun in the hand of a victim after the victim has been shot. (lack of contact wounds are red flags) Followed by the alleged "home invasion" during which a woman is murdered and presented nude or semi-dressed suggesting a sexual motivation. These are very common in domestic violence homicides and the

deaths are usually “overkill” type injuries. Furthermore, rape-kits are usually negative. Lastly, the alleged “accidental fire” after which the victim is found badly charred or burned. In these cases a forensic pathologist will be required to ascertain the level presence of carbon monoxide in the blood as well any soot in the esophagus consistent with the person being alive at the time of fire. In most cases, ballistics, stabbing wounds and/or blunt trauma will be found on the body.

Q. Aside from good evidence and a basic knowledge of forensics, are there any attributes that make someone a good homicide investigator?

A. Someone who has perseverance, a desire to be an advocate, and a desire to learn tactics, procedures, and forensic techniques. Everything I’ve done for the past 35 years has been to make myself a better murder cop. I went back to school for a second Master’s Degree. I’ve taken all sorts of eclectic courses, including 24 hours of forensic medicine, to make myself more knowledgeable about homicides. I’ve been able to integrate the things I’ve learned into this product called “Practical Homicide Investigation.” The instruction is “heavy-duty” stuff. It’s not for everybody. Some folks have a hard time in my classroom, but I tell them that if my photos and material are making them ill, they’re really going to have a bad time at the scene of a homicide. You’ve got to get that personal stuff out of the way. It’s not the body of your mother or father; it’s a piece of evidence now. What are you going to do with it? How are you going to reconstruct it now? Hypothesize what happened, have that “eye for detail?” You have to be able to take each point to its ultimate conclusion. These are all elements of Practical Homicide. It all begins at the scene of the crime. Investigators have to be able to lock this event in time! You have to stop it, and properly document it. Today, with the technology we have...shame on you if you don’t take advantage of it!

Q. I guess we’ve all met people in this business who have great opinions of themselves and their investigative abilities. Is confidence, or ego a beneficial attribute for homicide detectives?

A. Confidence yes, but there’s no room for ego. No one has ever heard me brag about myself. I would rather acknowledge someone else for his or her contribution. I’ve seen it happen. If you’re in a group of people, it’s called “group dynamics” where somebody emerges as the unofficial leader. Sometimes it’s the big-mouth, or egotist and if that person decides “hey, this is the way this case is going to go,” you’ve got to say “Hold it, this is my case!” The most important case in the world is the one your working on, so it’s up to you to do everything that your supposed to do to keep it right. You need a desire to be professional. No one should have a vested interest in the outcome of the case. You can’t make the case take place; the evidence has to lead you. Another beneficial trait for investigators is the ability to keep an open mind, so when new information comes in you have to be willing to make a 180-degree turn, midstream! You can’t say, “I’m going to look stupid now.” You’re going to look stupid if you don’t change. Investigations are very fluid, and are not for anal people. One particular block doesn’t always fit neatly next into another block. I’m still learning new things every day.

I've been involved with over 8,000 homicides that I've investigated, supervised, researched, and/or consulted on.

Q. And that continues today? You keep getting involved in new cases?

A. Yeah, you saw my desk! A lot of cases come to me as a direct result of investigators coming across something at crime scenes that they first saw in my class.

Q. Do other detectives ever ask you to help them solve a cases based upon your reputation and expertise or while you conduct your training seminars?

A. All the time. I try to explain to them that outside experts do not necessarily have a better chance of solving the crimes than the local police. After all, who is in a better position to know about their own citizens, local conditions, customs, geography and demographics than the town cops?

I also remind them that when I am instructing or demonstrating police and forensic techniques that I am using my "wins" not my "losses." I think what happens is that because you are showing a number of successful cases and demonstrating an obvious expertise that some folks become mesmerized into believing that the presenter is actually some sort of "super-sleuth." And I do know that some persons who teach present themselves as superior to others and claim an expertise that is really bogus. That is why they can't answer a question from the group and will usually state, "We will have to discuss your question after class," which by-the-way never happens. To me that is a disgrace and a shameful exhibit of an inflated ego.

Q. What type of questions do non-law enforcement people ask you about homicide investigations?

A. Many people are television trained due to programs like CSI, The New Detectives, Law and Order, etc. Thus, their questions usually revolve around some of the scientific methodology employed by the actors. Some may ask, "What do you know to look for in a suspicious death?" Others question "How do you know that someone has killed someone by just asking them questions?" Or, "How do you interrogate or obtain confessions from people who have killed and why do they talk?"

Q. Do you find a different dynamic between urban and rural police departments when it comes to investigating homicides?

A. The level of experience may not be the same, but then the level of frustration may not be the same either. Someone in an Inner City may be overwhelmed, and have cases up to their necks to the point where the next case just becomes another case. The person in the rural area may be overwhelmed by the pressure and uniqueness of the one homicide case that may not have happened there in years. I always maintain that the case your working on is the biggest case you'll ever have so make sure you do it right. And if

you're in a small agency, why not ask for help from a larger department? If you're too stupid to ask for help from the County, City, or State Police, shame on you!

Q. How about the F.B.I.? Since 9/11, have they shifted away from assisting local PD's to concentrate more on terrorism?

A. I wish they would. I wish they'd stop replicating and duplicating police work by calling Press Conferences. I wish they'd concentrate on International Terrorism, the World-Wide Web, Russian Mob, and the other things that most local PD's can't handle. They are good intelligence gatherers, and that's what they should be doing. They have excellent ERT teams and their buried body recovery operations are admirable. However, when they attempt to go operational it doesn't work. They can't make decisions on the street because it's got to go back to D.C. for approval. In many cases they require need an Assistant U.S. Attorney to tell them when to make an arrest. That's not the way local police function. We operate on "Probable Cause."

Q. Do you cover the use of informants in your course?

A. Informants are relatively rare in homicide investigations, but they are the norm in Narcotics cases. Therein lies the problem. Narcotics detectives don't want to burn their Informants on a murder case. It's not that I haven't used Informants in homicide cases, mostly gang and drug related murders. If your investigating a criminal enterprise your bound to come across somebody that's done something wrong, and now they want to work to get out from what they did. Unfortunately, if you make an arrest based upon the testimony of an informant you'll have to conduct another investigation to locate the informant when the time comes for trial! I'd much rather see a case crack because of the forensics.

Q. Are there many differences in the way that men and women commit murder?

A. Yes. Men are more apt to resort to physical violence involving beatings, strangulation, blunt trauma as well as shooting and stabbing. The female may wait until the victim is sleeping or drunk and then strike with a knife or blunt force instrument. Once again firearms play a significant part in female killing males. Also there are the "black widow" type murders where a woman may poison her companion over a period of time.

Q. Do you think that Practical Homicide Investigation is becoming the "standard" for police departments across the country?

A. I know it's the standard for most professional police departments. Chicago, Philadelphia, Detroit, Miami, Las Vegas, Honolulu and many other cities and most State Police Departments, including the Texas Rangers have attended the PHI courses and made it part of their program. 400 Practical Homicide books alone are sold to law offices every month. Practical Homicide is what defense lawyers are going to question you on!

Q. Where do you see Practical Homicide going from here? Is there a 4<sup>th</sup> Edition in the works?

A. No. New Editions just make the book more expensive. That's why I wrote the new textbook, **Sex-Related Homicide and Death Investigations: Practical and Clinical Perspectives**. If new information develops it can be found in other places, and I refer people to that information and source in my lectures.

Q. In looking around your office I see many new photographs from different cases. How do you keep generating this stream of new cases on a continuing basis?

A. I have a whole group of Practical Homicide "Disciples" around the world that I keep in touch with regularly. A lot of people want to be part of Practical Homicide because of it's a success. It's not just a training course; it's a whole attitude about doing the right thing. I get calls from investigators who want to talk about a particular case they are handling, and they may offer it to me as a "case study." All the photos that I publish, or make part of the course require permission, yet I will never identify the victims by name. The purpose of the photographs is to show the dynamics of the event. I really had a struggle writing the "Sex Related Homicide" book. It took over 3 years to write, and I had to put it down on a regular basis because it was so...horrible.

Q. Are you talking about the graphic nature of the photos?

A. Partly, however it was the horrific nature of the cases. In order for an investigator to walk into an event and NOT be overwhelmed, they should be prepared by seeing it in training and literature first. I get calls from people who've taken the course and never thought they'd see anything like it in person. Then, as they walk into the scene, they'll say, "This is right out of Geberth's book." One investigator told his sergeant at the scene of a particularly gruesome sex related homicide, "This is a Vernon Geberth situation, I know just what we have to do." They followed the protocol and were successful. That case was properly documented and successfully prosecuted. Today it's part of the Practical Homicide Investigation® program.

Q. Do you have any problems with the hierarchy in PD's when it comes to doing training?

A. I've never been one of the "politically correct" crowd, and I've ruffled a few feathers in my day. But no, I usually don't get resistance. Most police administrators are aware of Practical Homicide. People who generally get to the top of Police Departments have not been homicide detectives, or detectives at all for that matter. In fact, I can count them on both hands. People on the "fast track" don't waste time becoming investigators and therefore don't appreciate the achievements work and dedication of these operational professionals.

Q. They do like the cameras, though?



A. Oh, yeah! Many have inflated egos. But it's the police administrator's, at the request of their investigative commanders, who ultimately ask me to come in and do their training. I'm really shocked by the number of people who know my name today. Sometimes folks in the media get annoyed because I won't take 4 hours out of my day for 2 minutes of "speak." I've got a hectic life and a very busy schedule. However, if I believe I can make a contribution, I will make myself available and have often appeared on both T.V. and radio programs in connection with national cases. I can't tell you how many newspaper reporters I've dealt with regarding the subject of murder and homicide investigation .

Q. To the Media you're probably larger than life. They may think that Practical Homicide is a large business, with employees and instructors, when in actuality it's just you.

A. Well, two of my daughter-in-laws help me out so I guess it's a family business.

Q. As a businessman, have you found it a difficult transition from civil servant to entrepreneur?

A. It's pretty scary when you have to generate your own income. You've got to have a good product that people will recognize and be willing to pay for and it's a full-time job. I've had some people tell me that they have waited 2-3 years to get approval from their departments to attend the program. Training budgets are tight.

Q. Do you find yourself in competition with the F.B.I. Academy?

A. Absolutely not. It's a whole different dynamic. I'm a graduate of the F.B.I. National Academy, and it's a great place to network with investigators from other departments. Most of what they teach is theoretical. I do have a problem with some of the folks who purport to be homicide experts, because in their own minds they are great. They have no shame. They get up in front of a group of real detectives and pretend. They think they're getting away with it but cops figure them out in a N.Y. Minute! They know it's bullshit, and they leave those particular courses thinking that it was a waste of time. I don't think I've ever had that happen in Practical Homicide.

Q. Do you find most PD's have a specialized homicide unit?

A. No, most are generalists. Only the big departments can afford specialized units. But even within the generalist concept there are usually trained investigators who've gone through the schools and have background and experience. Hopefully, they are passing their knowledge and sharing their experiences with others.

Q. Do you think that investigators should be developed from the uniformed members, or would you rather see an F.B.I. model where PD's employ people directly to be investigators?

A. I don't think you can be a very astute investigator without first having spent some time on the street. It gives you the experience to recognize that people are capable of doing anything, and the expertise to handle the subject who looks you in the eye and lies with impunity about the crime. You get to be in pressure situations, and to see people at their best, and worst. You get to interact with people who are not always of the best character, and you learn some of the dynamics that will be very important later on in investigative operations. I don't think that a college degree, or specialized expertise in Accounting or the Law qualifies anyone to be an investigator per se. The street dynamic is a very important and necessary ingredient for professional status. There's too much "catch-up" if you haven't interacted with people on the street level. However, by the same token I believe that high education is an essential ingredient in formulating the professional investigator

Q. Where do you see homicide investigations going in the future?

A. It's all Hi-Tech. DNA just blows me away. Once you get past the legal issues of how it was collected, handled, and analyzed, the rest is just science. It's not subject to prejudice, it doesn't lie, doesn't have a bad day, it's science! "The DNA evidence says that you and only you out of the whole world's population donated the sperm that was found inside the rape victim!" Science! All these T.V. programs, CSI, Law & Order, they all use my book! It's really funny when I see some of my cases on these shows. It's amazing. Actually, it's NOT good for homicide investigators. Someone may see something on these shows and attempt implement the information into a "staged crime scene."

Q. Do you see Science replacing the basics of good old-fashioned police work?

A. NO. "Good Cop – Bad Cop" it never grows old. There's only so many ways for people to kill each other, and so many ways to do it. If you hang around long enough you get to see the replay, or in my case replay, replay, replay... Not many people retire from police service at a command level and decide to become a traveling homicide instructor. I could have gotten a nice Security job, sat on my duff, told people War Stories, and had Cocktails at 5 O'clock.

Q. It's a good thing for the rest of us that you didn't. Where would homicide investigations be without Practical Homicide?

A. I don't really know. Sometimes, it's tiring and overwhelming, but I know there is good coming out of it because I can see the results through the many e-mails and responses I receive from former students. In fact, I get to share vicariously in their good work because after all, **"We work for God."**