



Thomas Kropp is a sensei in Kenpo Karate that has won numerous tournament awards. His work has appeared in Muscle and Fitness, Woodworkers Journal, Outdoor Life, Nuthouse, J Journal, and Conceit magazines.

+++++

Deal

By Thomas Bart Kropp - Waupun, WI

With grim dread I faced the judge. I was looking at twenty years. With grim certainty I could see he wanted to bury me. But when you're a habitual criminal with six prior prison terms, you can't expect good will from judges when you're back with more felonies.

It'd been a violent life for me. At age eighteen I was the youngest Kenpo Karate instructor in Milwaukee and had won a long line of tournament trophies. By twenty I was in prison with over twenty serious street and prison fights, not counting the half dozen times I pushed, resisted, and wrestled groups of guards.

During that period of the 90s, I was documented as one of the most assaultive convicts in the maximum security prisons of Waupun, Green Bay and Portage, which I left

shortly before the famous killer cannibal Jeff Dahmer was beaten to death, minutes before wife-killer Jesse Anderson had his skull crushed by a weight collar.

My assaultive history kept me from having roommates, so I was celled alone and did six years off a seven-year bit. Half my time was done in bedlam discipline units we called The Hold. And when I was freed, I planned on never returning.

I went to work doing construction for decent money. But I became a part-time alcoholic who a lot of tough pugnacious drunks picked fights with. I also chose bad women. That cycle of stupidity led to five more prison bits before age forty. Along the way I'd been stabbed three times, struck by wood and metal clubs, zapped by Tasers, maced, and repeatedly menaced by guns. Now I sit in front of a judge again.

This current case was actually caught on video in front of witnesses. It showed a big bad thug run out into a parking lot and strike me with a yard-long metal cudgel. He swatted my blocking bicep, which saved my head from being



Tom Kropp
2 copies

crushed. Then he whacked my back and bashed my thigh with his bludgeon. I grabbed his weapon and we grappled over it briefly before it flipped from his fingers to clatter on the concrete.

Then he plucked out a small iron bar and swung at my skull. Largely by luck I caught it and shattered his nose with a right hand straight punch. He fell but rolled up, weapon in hand still. I grabbed the long bar. Like cavemen we crouched. And then jumped and swung at each other. My longer weapon slashed the top of his skull and peeled off a huge chunk of his scalp. It flapped over his face and left a gruesome, gushing gash atop his head. Much as my Indian ancestors once did, I'd scalped a man.

I avoid police awhile. When they grab me I'm too muscular to be cuffed with one pair of handcuffs. They get rough and choke me, then hit me in front of witnesses. Then it's a fight.

The D. A. charges me with scalping the clubber, even though it's on video he attacked me while armed. But the D. A. doesn't charge him with anything.

Then I'm facing multiple cop batteries.

And I spend three months in the county jail, waiting on a speedy jury trial.

You don't spend a large majority of life in courtrooms without learning a few things.

In Wisconsin, when you're arrested for a felony, the District Attorney has seventy-two hours to charge you or release you. Once charged, you see an intake commissioner, who sets a bail amount. If you don't have a lawyer, a public defender sees you for that hearing.

Then a preliminary hearing is scheduled. The "prelim" occurs within ten days. Again, if you don't have a lawyer, one is appointed, but you usually don't see him until the day of the prelim. At the prelim, a victim, witness, police officer, whoever the D. A. subpoenas shows up to testify about what they're claiming you did. All the D. A. has to prove is that there's "probable cause." You may have committed the felony in question. And that's a low bar for the D. A. to hurdle. Usually the judge finds in favor of the D. A., and you're bound over for trial. You can also ask the judge for a bail reduction.

If your bail is set too high and you can't bail out, you're entitled to a "speedy jury trial" within ninety days. A wise prisoner requests a speedy jury trial.

Ninety percent of the time a prisoner gets his/her best plea bargain offer the morning of jury trial. The best deals almost always occur last minute, before picking the jury.

If you don't have a speedy-jury-trial-demand in, your case and trial can be repeatedly postponed. And when a D. A. doesn't have a sure trial coming up, he can postpone the trial and focus on other upcoming cases. And during this period, the D. A. makes bad offers and hopes you're desperate enough to take one. But when a D. A. sees he has a trial coming up within a week, he usually makes another bad deal.

The D. A.'s last offer is Aggravated Battery While Armed. I refuse. He realizes with the video and eyewitnesses backing my self-defense case, I have a good chance of acquittal. So he last-second offers me Misdemeanor Battery as a repeater. The maximum sentence I can get is one year in prison and one-year parole. I accept the deal, and the judge gives me the maximum sentence.

But I still have the police batteries issues. That's another twenty-year threat.

In Wisconsin, once you've been sentenced to prison, the first prison you go to is Dodge Correctional in the city of Waupun. You spend usually two to four months at Dodge, while they decide where to send you. At Dodge you're locked down about twenty-three hours a day. You get an hour of rec, come out to eat

your meals, and that's it. You can't get a TV or radio. You're lucky if you get to the library once a week for reading books. If you have a lot of time, or you're known for fighting a lot or getting in trouble, they send you to a maximum security prison. Green Bay, Waupun, and Portage are the main maximum security prisons in Wisconsin. I was at all three, including Portage, where I knew Jeff Dahmer.

At both Green Bay and Waupun, I was in the North Cell hall, which is where they kept the most assaultive "red-tagged," no roommates. I was red-tagged. It was a hard-earned honor because I would attack anyone they tried locking me in a six-by-eight-foot cage with.

The North Cell halls were okay. If you didn't have a job or schooling, you spent a lot of time in your cell alone. But you could buy a TV, radio, fan, personal clothes and shoes. We got rec outside on the prison yard and in the weight room. There was a library and hobby shop.

If you were going to fight someone in a hurry, the smart ones tried to fight in cells or other spots where a guard or camera might not see.

Portage had smaller units with more cameras and guards for better security. I was there with Dahmer, and he was a pretty stoic, taciturn guy. He wasn't whining or complaining about his time. Torturing and killing was the highlight of life for him. He couldn't stop and had no regrets, except for getting caught. A tall black gangster disciple gang member caught both Dahmer and Anderson in the weight room bathroom area and crushed their skulls with a piece of iron from our weight room equipment.

I was in numerous fights in the maximum security prisons. We called them gladiator schools.

If you don't have over seven years and aren't fighting and getting into trouble, you can go to a medium camp. But you have to agree to have a roommate. It's different from max custody because at camp you can be out of your room and outside from sun-up to sundown. There's a prison yard, and you can walk, run, or play Frisbee, handball, basketball, soccer, volleyball. You can lift weights a couple hours a day. You can buy a TV, radio, fan, clothes and shoes. You can go to the library daily. There's also hoppy and music classes. Again, if you fight you try to do it in blind spots like cells or bathrooms.

Now I was on my way back to prison. My other jury trial was coming up in a week.

But the day before trial I was taken to a conference with my lawyer, and he laid out an offer from the D. A.

"I've got a unique offer for you, Tom," my attorney Mike said.

He was an average-looking tall white guy with dark hair and eyes. He was also quite astute.

"What is it?" I asked nervously.

"Are you friends with Chris Meyer?" Mike asked.

"Old acquaintances," I replied.

"Did he discuss the Holten murder with you?"

"Some," I hedged. "Why?"

"Anything incriminating?" Mike pressed.

"Some. Why?"

"Because the police and D. A. noticed during Meyer's three days in custody here, he sat by you at meals, worked out with you, and you're the only one he spoke to. You were both at Waupun prison for a year together. And before you were arrested in this, the undercover cops were watching the drug house he had going and photographed you coming and going from there. If you would be willing to go talk to Chris about the Holten homicide while carrying a small audio/visual cam, and get him to incriminate himself, the D. A. would throw out the cop battery cases."

Tom Kropp

Tom Kropp
2 copies

I sat nonplussed at the news. "Why would the D. A. ask me? I've never snitched before."

"Well, you're in your early forties, Tom. Right now you're going up north for a year. But these cop batteries are hard to beat. You're looking at being an old man before you get out, especially with you record. Meyer's got a prior strong-arm rape charge. He's a suspect in an abduction, rape and murder of a girl ten years ago. New here he's walked on another rape and murder charge. The D. A. wants him a lot more than you."

"He's also a crazy bastard with a lot of assaults, and with and without weapons," I pointed out.

"True. And he's not going to spill his guts to just anyone. But odds are he won't suspect you. You've partied with him before. Go to his place, get him high and drunk, and try getting him to spill his guts. If you succeed, the remaining charges go away." Mike shrugged.

"What about the prison time I'm doing? Can you try bargaining him into dropping that too?"

"Doubtful," Mike admitted. "But I can try."

"Then try, Mike."

Sheri Holten was a slim, lissome girl who ran and did gymnastics for a hobby. She was a pretty brunette with big brown eyes and a gregarious manner. She was twenty-eight and bartended part-time while going to school. And she also liked to do cocaine occasionally.

Chris had dated her briefly.

A month after their break-up, Chris stepped up on her as she walked to her car. He punched her in the head with brass knuckles and bound and gagged her with duct tape. He drove her out to a secluded, abandoned house where he repeatedly raped her. He pulled out two of her fingernails and one of her teeth while she was still alive. He put out several cigarettes on her face and body. Then he strangled her. By the time her body was discovered, coyotes had been gnawing at it.

Meyer was a tall, muscular man with dark hair and hazel eyes. He invited me in when I arrived with a bottle of vodka. "How'd your cases work out?" He asked.

"The video got everything reduced to a misdemeanor battery and resisting arrest." I lied.

Once we were drunk I innocuously commented, "you're lucky you beat that murder rap. The wrong woman can destroy a man."

"She thought she was so high and mighty. Too good for me. She wasn't so proud begging at the end." He smirked.

I wasn't sure how much that comment incriminated him. So as we partied more, I tried to broach the subject a couple more times.

And he got suspicious.

He was already wired and paranoid on crack. Then I show up at his house, right after I was facing a bunch of time on serious felony charges. And here I was pumping him for info on the murder charge he'd just been suspected of.

Chris made no tell-tale sign of his attack. I'd just taken a big hit when out of nowhere Chris stabbed me with a blade. The knife sliced along my rib and sank a couple inches in. I grabbed his weapon arm and we grappled for the weapon. His wide blade and vertical stab angle had speared through my thick chest muscles and wedged between two ribs. I slammed him into the wall and pried his thumb back. He madly thrashed and kneed me, but I broke his grip and nestled the knife tip below his heart. Animal desperation was in his eyes. His back was flat against a wall and a knife point in his chest. He realized I was much too

strong to stop if I chose to impale him.

"Stop! Wait! Wait!" he jabbered in panic.

"Is that how Holten begged you for her life?" I asked, ready to kill.

"What do you care?" he babbled. "You didn't know her!"

The cops were now doing a forced entry. They bashed the locked door in with their ramming bar. Then they were all over us, taking him into custody and me to the hospital.

The mini-audio/visual cam was in my belt buckle. Our conversation was enough to convict Chris of the rape and murder of Holten. My police battery charges were dropped. I still had to go to prison for nine more months on my initial battery charge over the lunatic who attacked me with two crow bars.

When I got out, I went back to work doing construction.

+++++

Thomas Kropp is a sensei in Kenpo karate that has won numerous tournament awards. His work has appeared in Muscle and Fitness, Woodworker's Journal, Outdoor Life, Nuthouse, J Journal, and Conceit magazines.

Tom Kropp
W4291 Cty Rd F
Campbellsport, WI
53010

W. K. R.
Tom Kropp 1933
Baxton
W. K. R. WI
53010