

# Arlington's Night of Gang Warfare

BY CHARLES S. CLARK

The parking lot of the Safeway at the Lee–Harrison shopping center appears in 2008 as tranquil and prosperous as that of any suburban American supermarket. Few shoppers are likely aware that on that same site the night of June 14, 1966, a motorcycle gang shootout erupted that sent some 100 bullets flying across the dimly lit pavement.

Arlington police and Virginia state troopers, stationed nearby after having been tipped off in advance, would swoop in and arrest nearly a score of 17–23 year–old denim–jacketed members of rival gangs called the Pagans and the Avengers. The officers would impound eight cars and confiscate dozens of weapons, including rifles, pistols, blackjacks, sawed-off shotguns and a baseball bat studded with nails.

In the words of Arlington County Police Chief William G. Fawver, “It was the most serious outbreak of mass violence this county has ever seen.” The melee drew front-page coverage in all the area dailies: “Rival Hot Rod and Cycle Clubs Have Gun Battle in Arlington; 18 Youths Held,” blared the headline in the *Washington Daily News*.

“Like the roaring 20s,” County Board member Kenneth Haggerty told the *Northern Virginia Sun*. “Idiots like this carrying weapons are a real danger to the citizens of our county.”

Astonishingly, not a single participating gang member or passerby was killed or seriously injured. But fears that placid Arlington was now threatened with a severe gang problem rippled across the county as political leaders, law enforcement professionals and neighborhood residents joined a debate over whether the hair-raising event should have been prevented.

What follows is an examination of the 1966 Pagans–Avengers shootout based on contemporary news accounts, internal police reports, and recollections shared in 2008 by Arlingtonians who lived through the event. It includes the first-ever interview with the former gang leader who was at the center of the action.

## Familiar Gang Territory

To the average Arlingtonian in the 1950s and 1960s, youth gangs were a visible if not dominant part of the landscape. Retired Arlington police captain Alvin Fuchsman recalls the time in March 1956 when he was summoned on a tip to the Arlington Forest shopping center at Park Drive and Route 50. He and other officers there arrested some 27 young men and confiscated their guns and



Arlington County Police Department  
Gang weapons and a jacket confiscated by police the night of the Lee-Harrison shootout.

knives without a shot being fired. The next day when Fuchsman was working the police department's public counter, "A mother came in and asked me, what right had I to take her son's guns? She didn't even acknowledge that we may have saved his life," he says.

Drag races run by hot-rod clubs were common on Glebe Road near Walker Chapel, and on the less-frequently patrolled Route 110 near the Pentagon. Favorite gang hangouts included the Birchmere music club (then in Shirlington, now in Alexandria), Falls Church Billiards, known as Tuthill's, on Lee Highway at Westmoreland St. (now La Cote d'Or restaurant), and Whitey's Restaurant on Washington Boulevard near Pershing Drive (now called Tallula). Perhaps the most celebrated gathering site was the Tops Drive-In at Lee Highway and George Mason (today a Chevy Chase Bank).

Henry Churchbourne, a retired Arlington police detective who moonlighted doing night security at the old Tops, recalls how he would keep an eye on the young men who would become the Avengers. The youths loitered across Lee Highway at a laundromat (now Reed's Custom Tailor) and across George Mason in the parking lot of the old WARL radio station. "There were lots of parties at a house off Lee Highway, but they were no trouble," Churchbourne recalls. "We picked one or two youths off for license tag violations, but they were really just weekend warriors."

Most of the local boys who gravitated toward the gangs had attended—or dropped out from—Williamsburg or Swanson junior highs, and Yorktown

or Washington–Lee high schools. Like their counterparts around the country, they wore slicked-back hair, bicep–displaying sleeveless jackets, and leather boots that, as the *Northern Virginia Sun* put it, were “popular with rock–and–roll groups.” Many of the future rival gang enemies had played together in Arlington as boys.

For the ones who would form the Avengers, the violence was limited to after-school fistfights. As described by former Avenger leader Wayne Hager, himself an eventual veteran of more than 40 imbroglios, an aggrieved kid would “call out” a rival, which might mean challenging him to meet behind the old Blue–Gray Market (then at Quincy Street and Washington Boulevard). Like a wrestling match, the fistfight usually lasted only until one fighter quit. At the time, “We were not a gang, just a bunch of guys hanging around at Tops,” Hager says.

The Pagans were a tougher breed. The Pagans Motorcycle Club had been formed in 1959 by a Marylander named Lou Dobkins. Headquartered in White Oak, in Prince George’s County, they aspired to be the East Coast branch of Hell’s Angels, and by the late 1960s and 70s would be linked to cases of torture, rape and murder. At the time of the 1966 shoutout, the Pagans were reported to number some 80, ages 18–30, with only a few in Northern Virginia. Some of these “guys were not so tough when they were alone,” Hager says, “but became tough when they were backed by others.” Looking back, he says, their psychology was “like a wolf pack; if one decided to do something, the rest would follow.” The Avengers “thought we were bad,” Hager adds, “but in the Pagans’ world of bad, we were nothing.”

Pagan culture required prospective members to commit crimes to earn their “colors” (the denim jackets with a leopard symbol), and they adhered to a hierarchy that elevated original members over newcomers. “Pagans never take baths—you can smell them a mile off,” one Avenger told the *Daily News*. At a Maryland beach, “we saw them making some of their girls eat dead eels—some sort of initiation, I guess.”

What the members of both gangs shared, besides an interest in fast cars and BSA and Triumph cycles, was antipathy toward their squarer classmates, whom they mocked as “fruits and collegiates.” As a pair of gang members’ wives explained to the *Washington Post*, a “fruit” was “not necessarily a homosexual, but `a person who doesn’t take an interest in anybody’s life but their own.’” Collegiates were “children of the richer families in this area who drive brand-new high-powered cars” or, even worse in the gangs’ view, the punier motorcycles made by Honda and Yamaha.

The men who would stage the Lee–Harrison shootout held day jobs as grocery clerks, drywall crewmen, and housepainters. “Products of blue-collar workers and often of broken homes, these restless proud men roam the area

looking for excitement and showing off to their women,” the *Post* reporters wrote. “They are all white.”

## Roots of the Clash

The tensions that ignited the 1966 shootout were actually born a good four years earlier, according to Wayne Hager, who at the time the bullets flew was a 25-year-old meat cutter employed by Safeway. The Pagans had a rule that no one could “go to church without colors,” which meant no one but proven members could attend Pagan meetings. Flouting this, Hager rode his cycle to many of the same motorcycle race tracks but resisted pressure to join the club, he says.

Resulting resentment of Hager among Pagans grew in late 1965, when an up-and-coming 20-year-old aspiring Pagan from Arlington named Frederick “Dutch” Burhans had a series of clashes with Hager. At a mutual friend’s house on George Mason Drive, Hager recalls, Burhans taunted him about issues as small as the proper shape of a motorcycle’s handlebars. Another aspiring Pagan, Burt Schoepper, stole Hager’s motorcycle, worsening the tensions. Burhans impressed upon Hager that he should show more respect for the Pagans. In a fistfight that ensued, Hager beat Burhans “fair and square,” according to Hager.

A day or two later, Hager’s parents’ house at 1705 Roosevelt Street was firebombed. During the following months, Hager’s prized possession, his 1965 Chevy Impala, was set on fire and then shot up with bullets.

Hostility toward Hager intensified, expressed in a threat (reported to Hager by police) that Pagans planned to throw acid in the face of his mother, or cut off his hands and deliver them in a shoebox. Soon, Molotov cocktails were thrown on Hager’s lawn. Finally, there were threats to kill him.

“The bottom line,” Hager summed up years later, was that “we were from Arlington, and we weren’t going to have the Pagans from Maryland tell us what to do.”

The solution embraced by Hager, friends John Thomas and E.B. Hutton, and others was, “Why don’t we start a gang?” Just weeks before the June shootout, Hager’s group went to downtown Washington to the ABC Lettering shop, where they ordered 30–40 jackets, emblazoning them with a Maltese cross with a skull, proclaiming themselves the Avengers. (Both the Pagans and the Avengers used an improper apostrophe as a possessive on their jackets, labeling themselves “The Pagan’s” and “The Avenger’s.”)

It was against this backdrop that a tragic series of events unfolded that news accounts would link directly to the June 14 shootout. The weekend before, in North Beach, Md., on the Chesapeake Bay, a Pagan from Silver Spring, Md., named Samuel Frederick was in a bar with Hager and some other Avengers. Suspicions of spying were common whenever the two gang groups met

up. Tempers flared, and soon Frederick was “called out” to fight an Avenger named Rusty O’Brien. According to Hager, who had been friendly enough with Frederick to attend motorcycle races together, “the fight was a draw,” and Frederick was not seriously injured. Newspaper reports, however, said he was treated at a hospital.

As Frederick was riding his motorcycle back home that Sunday, he smashed into the back of a truck and was killed. When the Pagans heard the news, they blamed the Avengers and swore a “blood oath” to kill Hager. Avengers were heard to boast, “We’re not afraid of the Pagans.” Word went out to members of both gangs that things would come to a head on Tuesday night at “the lot”—the Lee—Harrison Safeway.

### **Bullets Over the Supermarket**

At about 3:30 p.m. on Tuesday, June 14, 1966, Arlington County Detective Charles Mackey, as he would later note in his police report, received a call from the Falls Church police informing him that as many as 200 Pagans were descending on an Arlington Safeway to shoot Avengers, perhaps from rooftops. At 5:30, Mackey received a second call, this one from the mother of a Pagan who had been told of the evening’s plan. Mackey called area police departments to verify Frederick’s recent death and to spread the alert. Mackey knew many of the gang members, and, he said in a recent interview, he personally warned them not to make trouble.

At 8:00 p.m., the Avengers arrived first, some 15–20 of them debarking from cars in the parking lot. They were carrying openly, according to Hager, a 25 mm automatic, brass knuckles, an AR-15 rifle, hunting rifles, and clubs. Weapons “were lying on the (car) hoods, in the seats, anywhere you looked you could see guns,” police Private James Winlund would later tell a courtroom. Hager’s girlfriend Linda stayed in the car, as was the common practice for gang women when their men were “conducting business.”

Police were watching from across various positions around Lee Highway and Harrison Street, under orders prearranged with Commonwealth’s Attorney William J. Hassan not to intervene until the gang members, who were on private property with unconcealed weapons, broke the law.

At about 10:30, Arlington police arrested two Pagans walking toward the Safeway on nearby Illinois Street. Carrying illegal sawed-off shotguns were Falls Church residents Richard Cooper, 21 a meat-cutter, and Thomas Greenwood, 19, a hydro-seeder.

Moments later, a couple of carloads of Pagans swung by led by a ’56 white Chevy station wagon driven by Arthur Molle Jr. Some Avengers threw a tire iron at the vehicle, Hager says, and Molle’s car turned up Jefferson Street,

'HOW'S EVERYTHING IN SAIGON?'



The Washington Daily News, June 16, 1966

where the Pagans knew of a short cut near a friend's house that gave them "a bird's eye view of us standing in the lot" in front of what then was a Drug Fair (the site, most recently, of Hollywood Video).

At 11:04 p.m., at the precise moment when the waiting police officers were changing shifts, the first shots rang out from a woodsy area behind Gifford's Ice Cream (now Joe's Pizza). As a police sergeant told the *Post*, "I hit the dirt and called for help, but I had to repeat myself because the sound of the shots covered my radio transmission." Detective Mackey, who had finished his shift, was driving home toward the courthouse when a frantic report came on the radio that "all hell was breaking loose." He turned around in Cherrydale and headed back to Lee-Harrison.

According to a police report, a 21-year-old Pagan named Warner Ray Cockerille, of Vienna, Va., fired a gun from a clump of bushes in the rear of the Safeway (the layout of the Safeway building years later would be reconfigured). According to Hager, more sniper shots may have come from across Lee Highway (where Blockbuster Video is today). The Avengers immediately returned fire.

Police were within 40 feet of the crossfire, but in the few minutes of gun volleys and an estimated 100 shots, the only injury was to a state trooper whose leg was grazed by a bullet ricochet. One parked car and a vacant store window on the lot were struck by pellets. (Later on, police officers would grimly joke that the delinquents who triggered the "most shots fired in Arlington since 1865" clearly had poor aim. Hager says the reason no one was hit was that the shooters were not going for the kill.)

At the first sound of gunfire, Hager had ducked to the ground, "a natural reaction," he notes. He watched as the police cars and foot patrolmen swarmed in carrying what he says were Thompson machine guns (not commonly used, but part of the police arsenal). Hager then noticed that the security ring the police were cordoning off did not encompass Anderson's Sunoco station (still operating today at Lee-Harrison, but moved further back from the highway).

Thinking at that moment that the cops were on the Avengers' side, Hager and other Avengers threw guns in his Impala, and he and his girlfriend maneuvered through the Sunoco lot. They sped down Lee Highway in a lane opposite the line of dozens of police and state trooper cars still converging on the Safeway with lights flashing. Hager raced to his home on Roosevelt Street, dropped his weapons off in his bedroom, and returned to Lee-Harrison. From across Lee Highway at the Flying A gas station (now a Pure station), he joined neighborhood onlookers watching the police drape yellow ribbon around the crime scene.

Suddenly, Hager spotted Pagan member Molle's '56 Chevy and pointed him out to police. Jumping in his own car, Hager then accompanied the police

caravan in a 90 mph chase down Lee Highway to, eventually, arrest Molle. But a state trooper pulled Hager over at George Mason Drive and tried to arrest him before another trooper, Onyx R. “Muffler” Metz, vouched for him. “There were not great relations between the Arlington police and the state police, not a lot of communication,” recalls retired officer Churchbourne, in part because of the limits of their radio technology.

After 16 gang members were arrested that night, several more would follow the next day. Cockerille was arrested at his home in Vienna, and a second Pagan, Joseph Johnson, at his home in Prince George’s County. Most were charged with disorderly conduct, possession of a concealed weapon, and inciting a riot. Cockerille was charged with murder, on a complaint from Wayne Hager (who was not arrested).

Surprisingly, most of those charged were members of the Avengers. And notably absent from the scene that night was Dutch Burhans, the Pagan who had generated so much hostility toward Avenger leader Hager.

### **Preventable Violence?**

In the days that followed, a raucous debate unfolded on editorial pages and within the Arlington County Board. A *Washington Post* editorial thundered about the “appalling ineptitude” of Arlington police for failing to head off the shootout. Board member Haggerty demanded a special meeting for June 16 to consider ways to change the gun laws that had prevented police from pro-actively obstructing the gang members. “It seems incredible that hoodlums could gather with guns while police watched them have a shooting war,” he said.

Board member Harold J. Casto, like Haggerty a Republican, was unsure if police made the right move in “the worst riot we’ve ever had in Arlington.” He called for an investigation that went deeper than an evaluation made by County Manager Bert W. Johnson, which, Casto said, was only “a little piece of paper.”

Board chair Leo Urbanske had been willing to join Haggerty in calling a special meeting to come up with a legal opinion on whether the eventual charge of disorderly conduct could have been invoked to prevent the melee. But after that plan was announced, Urbanske quickly cancelled it after Commonwealth’s Attorney Hassan protested that a public meeting would jeopardize the prosecutions he was planning for the gang members.

Hassan, who had instructed police officers not to share evidence with the county board, argued that the mere fact that the police were warned twice of the gathering did not provide grounds for arresting the members who had assembled quietly. Police chief Fawver argued that any attempt to arrest the Pagans or Avengers before the shooting would have created a “false arrest” problem.



Charles Del Vecchio, © The Washington Post, reprinted with permission  
Pagan member Warner Ray Cockerille, extreme right, is handcuffed to Avenger Donald L. Morley, as they and other gang members are led to a hearing at the Arlington courthouse on June 15, 1966.

At the next scheduled county board meeting 10 days later, Urbanske, along with Thomas Richards, both of the Democratic-leaning Arlingtonians for a Better County, voted to commend the police. “It’s easy to Monday morning quarterback after the shooting is over,” Urbanske told the *Evening Star*. Casto was the lone no vote, while Haggerty abstained. (ABC county board member Joseph Fisher was absent.)

When Urbanske had cancelled the special meeting, Haggerty called him “gutless,” saying that Hassan’s views shouldn’t prevent elected officials from meeting on the case. Speaking in 2008, Haggerty says that although “some board members were looking for a little attention,” he now agrees that the best course of action was a private meeting between law enforcement and county officials. “Virginia gun laws prevented police from acting,” he says. “It’s a tough call, but I believe in the right to bear arms to protect one’s self. So I back the police” decision to hold off unless the gang members fired first.

Interestingly, Hassan himself would begin acting preemptively against gangs only two days after the shootout. Acting on his instructions, police arrested two Avengers, Donald Morley and John Thomas, after they bought two shotguns, a rifle and 100 rounds of ammunition at the pawn shop at Lyon Village. In defending the pro-active arrests, Hassan cited a county ordinance linked to 1965 racial incidents allowing arrests of persons “whose course of conduct (is) reasonably calculated to cause consternation and alarm in the community.” Churchbourne says a new ordinance later allowed police to intervene on private property if the owner allowed it—a capability the Arlington police use to this day.

The decision not to intervene was defended by Arlingtonian Elisabeth Wood, who wrote to the *Post* that the police are not lawyers and were acting under orders. "In spite of these restrictions," she wrote, "the police did manage to prevent any major clash, and succeeded in arresting a number of the hoodlum leaders."

Another contributor to the *Post's* letters on the "Battle of Arlington," a Lee-Harrison neighbor named J.H. Kipple, argued that police had owed it to local citizens to protect them by placing "No Trespassing" signs at the shopping center. He described a "little neighbor boy who dropped in at my back porch the evening after the battle saying, 'Look what I found.' He had an unexploded shotgun shell. He thought it was a lipstick tube, and he was trying to get it open!"

### The Punishments

Two days after the shooting, newspapers ran photographs of a line of both Pagans and Avengers handcuffed together and being led to the Arlington courthouse. The hearings would draw an overflow crowd of 200, as Commonwealth's Attorney Hassan and police officers sought to make the disorderly conduct charges stick. The two juveniles charged were freed to the custody of their parents under the supervision of Judge Berton V. Kramer.

Arlington Court Judge Thomas Dodge paid special attention to Warren Ray Cockerille, the six-foot-nine Pagan who had been charged with attempted murder and shooting at an occupied automobile. His bond was set at \$1,500. (The charges against him were later dropped when witnesses failed to show up to testify.) In the courtroom of Judge J. Jackson Embrey, eleven of the gang members were found guilty of disorderly conduct and inciting to riot, while one, Roger Stanley, was acquitted. The guilty drew fines from \$100 to \$250 and suspended jail sentences, except for Avenger Donald Morley, who was given thirty days in jail, with all but five suspended. Pagan Arthur Molle, charged with shooting into an occupied vehicle, had his charges dismissed.

Pagans Greenwood and Cooper, who had been apprehended with illegal weapons just before the shootout, had their local charges dropped while their case headed to a federal grand jury in Newport News. (They were later charged, and on July 27 pleaded guilty in Alexandria federal court, receiving a suspended sentence.)

During this period, both Hassan and Judge Embrey struck fear in the hearts of the Arlington gang members, recalls Wayne Hager. "We were literally shaking when we'd go the courthouse to face Hassan. And Embrey threatened us, saying, 'If I see any two of you guys wearing jackets, I'll lock you up.'"

## Aftermath

In the days following the shootout, tensions between the gangs would ebb and flow. A photo of Pagans attending the burial of Samuel Frederick in Burtonsville, Md., appeared in the *Post*, which reported that Pagans at a press conference were still vowing revenge against the Avengers. On June 22, representatives of the gangs met to try to disarm and reach a “cold war,” which would mean none would carry weapons or wear colors in the other’s territory. The wife of one Pagan told the *Daily News* that the playing with guns was so disgusting, she wanted to burn the gang’s jackets.

One lesson drawn was expressed by an Arlington high school student, who told the *Post*: “If only there were halfway decent recreational facilities around here, the clubs might stop feuding if members had a place to go that didn’t just appeal to the fruits and collegiates.”

The Pagans would eventually establish a Virginia chapter, though Hager, bearing a grudge, still declined to join. Some would drift away from gang life as they married and took on jobs. Others would go on to commit crimes far more serious than fistfights or weapons possession. For years, Pagan members gathering in public would be kept under surveillance by Arlington police, and one house near Glebe Road and Lee Highway was raided and weapons confiscated.

Dutch Burhans, with whom Hager had feuded and whose absence from the shootout prompted much speculation, would go on to become president of the Pagans in the mid-70s. He then joined other gangs in points south. In January 1980, he was shot and killed in a Fairfax City apartment. The *Post* reported the Fairfax prosecutor’s belief that the motive was revenge for the breakup of a marriage. But word among Arlington gang observers is that Burhans died after a drug deal had gone bad.

Wayne Hager, now 68, still has his Avengers jacket, and keeps a scrapbook of clippings and documents from his gang days. He still drives the 1965 Chevy Impala that was burned before the shootout. Its odometer reads over 220,000 miles, and beneath the handsome paint, the car bears few clues of its history of bullet holes, smashed windows and tires slashed by enemies.

In his later years, a mellowed Hager has developed a respect and affection for the police officers, prosecutors, and judges he encountered in his youth, as well as for many of his former rivals in the Pagans. In the late 1980s, in his Springfield, Va., home, he was paid a social visit by ex-Pagan Tom Greenwood, with whom he had played when both were young boys in their Arlington–East Falls Church neighborhood. “Greenwood ’fessed up that he had been made to pretend that he hated me, and told me that he hadn’t been present when my car was burned,” Hager says. “He said I didn’t deserve all those threats from the Pagans who wanted to kill me.”

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Charles S. Clark, a frequent contributor to the magazine, grew up and still lives in Arlington. When the 1966 gang shootout took place, he was finishing 7th grade at Williamsburg Jr. High. He would like to thank “Tony” for his help with the research for this article.

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