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Ex-Turlock cop denied concealed carry request despite previous attack

By Garth Stapley

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Matt Speckman, a former Turlock police sergeant, used to be in charge of processing concealed gun permits. Now retired, he'd like one himself.

"I'm not a gun nut," Speckman said. "But I've been involved in investigations of people now getting paroled who have probably been throwing darts at my picture in their cells."

Speckman, 49, attended the FBI academy, trained at a nationally recognized firearms course, earned an MBA, is studying for a Ph.D, toted a gun for 30 years and screened gun permit applicants for seven years.

Yet Turlock Police Chief Gary Hampton and Sheriff Adam Christianson, both of whom have approved gun permits for politicians and prominent businessmen, turned him down.

Speckman since has moved from Turlock and says he doesn't obsess about his safety. But reports about people who find favor with law enforcement executives despite relative lack of experience, he says, point up the arbitrary nature of concealed gun permits in California, where many agencies endure charges of political favoritism.

As commander of his former department's internal affairs, Speckman once investigated a former officer whose resignation was demanded in lieu of firing, he said. But Christianson approved a permit for the former officer two weeks before denying Speckman's, he said.

Having been on the other side, Speckman said he understands the heavy burden of determining good cause. What if someone granted a permit uses a gun recklessly? On the other hand, what if someone denied a permit later is harmed?

"I understand the need for case by case (discretion)," he said. "But the intent of the law is that someone who has more chance of being victimized should be given a permit.

"It's just gotten to the point where I wish there were something a little bit more standard."

He's experienced firsthand the threats that can follow people who work in the judicial system. That's one reason the list of people who have concealed weapons permits in Stanislaus County contains judges, deputy district attorneys and retired police officers.

In 1991, two men broke into Speckman's home when he was away and met him at the front door when he returned -- armed with his own handgun. He was ordered face-down on the front lawn.

"(The gunman) said, 'You're going to learn to die execution-style,'" Speckman recalled, and fired two or three rounds into the grass before fleeing.

The men later were arrested, sent to prison and paroled. Although Speckman since has moved, neighbors told him they twice saw the gunman lurking around his former home.

Sheriffs and police chiefs in California generally observe a court standard requiring them to judge a concealed weapon applicant's "good moral character" and "good cause."

It's among a minority of "may issue" states, while adults meeting lower standards for buying firearms can get permits for the asking in 37 "shall issue" states; Alaska and Vermont allow people to carry concealed weapons without permits.



DEBBIE NODA/dnoda@modbee.com Retired Turlock police officer, Matt Speckman. His application for a gun permit as a private citizen was rejected by both his former agency and the sheriff's department. April 9, 2010 - Modesto Bee - Debbie Noda

Neither Christianson nor Hampton could be reached Friday, the same day a Bee article noted that Hampton takes political office into account when issuing permits. Two of seven he's approved are held by Turlock City Council members.

Speckman said Hampton refused to consider his application when his one-year permit expired a year after he retired, and referred him to the sheriff's office, which has licensed 52 Turlock residents.

"You do not meet our criteria for issuance," reads Christianson's June rejection letter to Speckman.

Speckman said he knew nothing about Hampton's unique request in 2008 to the sheriff asking him not to issue permits to Turlock residents without first sending them to Turlock police, until reading about it in recent Bee stories. Hampton's request came about the time Speckman retired; Christianson this week indicated he respects the request but retains authority to ignore it.

No one in Christianson's office said anything about the Turlock arrangement, Speckman said. So he took a \$100 firearms refresher course and paid \$108 in permit fees only to be turned away, he said.

"No one said to me, 'We don't do Turlock; don't waste your money because we're going to deny it,' " he said.

Sheriff Adam Christianson is scheduled to address the issue of concealed weapon permits in a meeting of the Madison Society Foundation at 7 p.m. Monday in the Stanislaus County Library, 1500 I St., Modesto.

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