



Why Are We Killing Ourselves: A look at accidental shootings of police officers by police officers

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Revised 2005

Accidental shootings occur in law enforcement training and real-life situations at an alarming frequency. There is a direct correlation between training standards, safety protocol and operational performance. Recent deaths of police officers at the hands fellow police officers prompted the author to investigate the prevalence of this situation. The results of this investigation are not only disturbing, but shocking and elicit the following questions:

- **Why are we killing ourselves?**
- **How do we ensure safe and effective training?**

Prior to answering these questions, an understanding of the dilemma we face must be achieved. First the obvious, law enforcement officers carry firearms and handle them on a regular basis. SWAT officers and range personnel are even more prone to accidental discharges because of the sheer frequency that results from their weapons handling, training and operational requirements.

What is even more disturbing than the pervasiveness of improper firearms safety, is the fact that most law enforcement training is devoid of safety standards and is unrelated to operational requirements. All law enforcement training must be conducted with established safety guidelines and be a realistic portrayal of operational requirements. In addition, training should be designed to prepare and test officers in their individual and in the case of SWAT officers, team responsibilities.

A properly designed and implemented training program will enhance the opportunity to achieve the successful realization of operational objectives, to include officer safety issues. By implementing and practicing safety standards and protocol in training, a basis for operational safety can be created. A lack of safety standards or their subsequent enforcement can result in death or serious injury. While the author understands that “accidents” can occur, we need to eliminate or at the very least, minimize their severity.

This article is primarily directed toward firearms instructors and Special Weapons and Tactics team operators, team leaders and commanders. However, there is also a direct application for any law enforcement officer who carries a firearm and administrators with fiscal responsibilities.

The following incidents are described using the states of their occurrence and are only a few examples of police officers shooting themselves or other police officers, all resulting in death or serious injury.

- A Rhode Island police captain was shot in the head and killed by a sniper during a training exercise. The captain had conducted a scenario earlier in the day where the sniper deployed in an observation role, only with binoculars. During a break, the sniper asked and received permission to retrieve his rifle from his police department locker. When the sniper returned, he deployed to his final operational position on top of a bus for the next scenario. The scenario had not yet started and the captain was seated in another bus that was to be the target location. The sniper decided to check his view of the target location. His magazine was removed from the rifle when he attempted to “dry fire” after sighting-in the captain seated on the bus. Although it has not been confirmed, it is believed that the round in the chamber had been left there from a previous training session and the chamber had not been checked. The captain, described as a weapons safety devotee, was killed instantly when the round penetrated his skull. The sniper was indicted on a charge of involuntary manslaughter by the grand jury and plead no contest.

- An Alberta, Canada SWAT officer was shot and killed by a fellow SWAT officer during a hostage rescue training exercise. Members of two different groups from the same SWAT team were practicing room-clearing techniques for hostage rescue operations. One of the officers was assigned to research and development of cameras and fiber optic systems. A short break was taken for this officer to retrieve the system from his vehicle parked in a public parking lot. Per department policy, he reloaded his handgun prior to entering a public area. Upon his return, he hurriedly set up the camera system because team members at another location were awaiting the officers participating in this training to arrive at their location for additional training. After set-up was complete, the same officer was assigned as an assaulter on the entry team for the next scenario. He unloaded the magazine from his handgun, but was interrupted and did not remove the bullet from the chamber. When entry was made during the scenario, he fired one shot at another SWAT officer playing the role of a hostage taker, striking him in the neck. The round exited through his face, killing him in the arms of another SWAT officer. This was to have been a dry weapon exercise. It was commented by fellow team members, “Losing three officers going through the door [on an operation] would not be as bad a losing one officer this way.”
- A Maryland SWAT officer was shot with a shotgun during a room clearing exercise at a police department SWAT school. The pellets struck his upper shoulder and arm, after ricocheting off his body armor, causing the permanent incapacitation of his arm. Several officers were also struck with pellets and sustained non-life-threatening injuries. Blanks and fireworks were to be used during the exercise. Officers had been attending the SWAT school from multiple jurisdictions. The officer who fired the shot, arrived late for the training and bypassed all safety checks. He fired the weapon down a hall during an entry team scenario. The officer thought shotgun was still unloaded from a training session conducted the previous evening. After this incident, the Commander of the Maryland SWAT team banned *all* SWAT training, except for qualifications, for several years. His intent was to prevent future accidental shootings from occurring under similar situations. As a result of this incident, the officer who was shot retired on a medical disability. The SWAT Commander retired on a stress related medical disability and the officer who fired the shot, retired on a psychological disability.
- A Maryland SWAT officer was shot in the back of the head and killed by a fellow SWAT officer while executing a narcotics search warrant on a residence. The officers had been briefed that automatic weapons may be present in the house. The officer killed was the pointman on his tactical team and approached the house on his hands and knees to place the hydraulic breaching tool in the door. As the hydraulic “rabbit” tool expanded, it caused the door to emit a loud cracking noise sounding like gunfire. Two members of the entry team behind the officer believed the team was under fire and discharged their weapons. At the same time, the officer who had just inserted the rabbit tool, started to stand and was struck and killed by the gunfire from one of the team members behind him.
- An Oregon SWAT officer was shot in the head and killed during a tactical training exercise. The SWAT officer and his teammates were training in a building where only simulated ammunition was to be used. A team member retrieved a magazine thought to be unloaded, from the SWAT truck. This occurred during a lunch break and a safety check was not conducted when the officer with the magazine returned to the scene. The .223 weapon was fired from a position on the parameter of the operation, killing the officer who was playing the role of a suspect. An investigation by the Sheriff’s Department Review Board found, “The SWAT team failed to have policy and standard operating procedures in place for safety issues dealing with training requiring live weapons.” As a result of this incident the SWAT team was disbanded and only recently has been restructured.
- An Oregon SWAT sergeant was shot in the chest by a SWAT sniper during a tactical operation. Team members were searching for the suspect accused of wounding a relative. The incident occurred on a cold, foggy evening where the police helicopter could not break through the fog to view the terrain. One person was wounded inside the house. The suspect had last been observed at the rear of his house, in brush area on his 10 acre property. The SWAT officers did not know that there was pile of brush that had been burning earlier in the day, located in the same area. The sniper and observer set up in their final operational position

on the 2-3 corner of the residence, approximately 70-80 yards away from where the suspect had last been seen. The sniper observed what was later described as an “ember in the brush pile” giving the appearance of a person smoking a cigarette. The observer’s radio was not working throughout the operation causing the sniper to handle radio transmission responsibilities. The sniper was in position with his .308 rifle and 4.5 x 14-power scope with an illuminated reticle. The observer had a .223 rifle with 1.5-power mildot scope. A perimeter was established by SWAT team members. Ten minutes prior to deployment the sniper and observer were advised the suspect was 15 yards off of Side 3, at the brush/burn pile. The entry team had been positioned at the 1-2 corner staged to enter the residence when the sergeant who was the entry team leader, split the entry team without advising the rest of SWAT team via the radio. Three officers now moved to the 2-3 corner, while four officers moved to Side 4 of the house. Due to the fog and brush, the entry team members were not observed by the sniper/observer team during their movement. Normally, changes of plan are communicated to all team members. The SWAT Commander also communicates tactical team movement and sniper team coverage responsibilities. However, it is unknown why this procedure was not followed or why there was a lack of communication. The sergeant moved to a position approximately 15 yards from the 3-4 corner. The sniper was convinced the burn pile had the image of a person and observed what appeared to be the clear outline of a person. The observer stated the image seen looked like the suspect. Due to the angle of the sniper/observer team position, the sergeant was about 10 yards to the left of the pile. In previous tactical team training and on operations, team members never move alone. The figure observed had what appeared to be a rifle being held in a firing position up in his shoulder. Tactical team members usually keep their weapons in the low-ready position while moving, unless they encounter a target. The sniper observed an individual scanning the area with his weapon up and ready to fire. The individual under observation then stopped like he had acquired a target in the area where team members had been positioned. The sniper fired his rifle to protect other team members staged in the direction where the muzzle of the individual’s weapon was pointed. There was no doubt in the sniper’s mind that the person he shot had a weapon and had picked up a target to engage. The weapon being held appeared to be a rifle matching the information previously provided to tactical officers at the briefing. The sergeant who was shot with a .308 round by the sniper was actually holding an MP-5 sub-machine gun. The round penetrated the sergeant’s vest and entered the left side of his chest. He is expected to recover from his injuries and has left the SWAT team.

- A North Carolina Deputy Sheriff unaware that a military training exercise was being conducted, shot and killed a Special Forces lieutenant and wounded another soldier. The deputy stopped what he thought was a suspicious vehicle driven by a local man. The soldiers riding in the truck were dressed in civilian clothes, carrying a disassembled M-4 rifle in a duffel bag. When one of the three men in the truck came at the deputy, he used pepper spray, then opened fire, killing the lieutenant and wounding the other soldier. The soldiers thought the deputy was role-playing and intentionally resisted arrest. The deputy believing his life was in imminent danger of serious injury or death, shot the soldiers. Military personnel did not notify Sheriff’s department officials of the training exercise, because no one thought they would be involved. As a result of this incident, military officials announced changes in training scenario procedure to include the elimination of role-playing with civilian law enforcement agencies and requiring soldiers to remain in uniform.
- A Texas SWAT sergeant was accidentally shot and killed by a fellow SWAT team member during a barricade situation. The sergeant and other SWAT team members entered a home during a standoff with a suicidal man thought to have several weapons. Officers initially responded to the residence for a domestic dispute involving the man and his wife. After the wife left the home, the man dragged several pieces of furniture into the yard, doused them with gasoline, and then set them on fire. When officers arrived on the scene, the man was barricaded inside of the house. Several hours later, officers began clearing the windows in the house by knocking the glass out and removing any blinds obstructing the view into the home. One shot was initially fired by a member of the SWAT team, accidentally killing the SWAT sergeant. Other officers on the scene, thinking the shot was fired from the suspect inside the house, fired a total of 179 rounds. The unarmed suspect was wounded by the ensuing gunfire, but did not surrender until additional

tear gas was fired into the home. The jurisdiction involved has paid over \$1,000,000 to settle lawsuits resulting from this incident. In addition, the chief of police who was out of town during the incident was fired from his job due to political repercussions.

- A Texas police corporal was shot by a fellow instructor in the head during active-shooter response training at a local junior high school. All of the officers involved were wearing helmets and vests and were not supposed to have live ammunition. After a lunch break, the corporal and another instructor were demonstrating a drill to other officers when the instructor's weapon discharged, striking the corporal in the head with a live round. The instructor had pulled his own loaded 9mm semiautomatic handgun from his holster which he reloaded when he went to lunch. However, the weapon was not unloaded again when he returned to the training, causing this fatality.
- A Texas police officer was accidentally shot and killed by a fellow officer while serving a search warrant. Members of the narcotics team were executing the search warrant in a residence with multiple connecting doorways and rooms. The officer entered the room through one doorway, but after clearing the room, appeared in another doorway. A fellow narcotics officer upon observing someone with a weapon whom he did not immediately recognize, became startled and fired his shotgun killing the officer.
- A Texas police officer was accidentally shot and killed by a fellow officer while explaining a training exercise conducted earlier in the day. The officer had returned to the police station from the training site and was demonstrating a tactical training exercise conducted earlier in the day. The officer forgot he had reloaded his weapon after the training session and became very involved in his explanation when he fired one shot, killing his fellow officer.
- A Texas police officer was shot and killed by a fellow officer during the execution of a narcotics search warrant at an apartment. The tactical team was comprised of officers from two jurisdictions who attended an operational briefing prior to deploying. The officer who was shot did not attend the briefing, because he was conducting surveillance at the scene. The officer saw the tactical team was delayed at the entry point and rushed to the door to assist with his handgun drawn. He was not wearing a raid jacket or visible police identification and was unknown to the entry team member from another jurisdiction who fired the shot. The officer was shot with an MP-5 submachine gun. A lawsuit was filed by the officer's family resulting in a multimillion-dollar award.
- A New Jersey police lieutenant accidentally shot and killed himself while cleaning his pistol. He and other officers had just completed the department's semi-annual qualification course and was cleaning his .40 caliber handgun when it discharged, striking him in the abdomen. He was transported to a local hospital where he died approximately one hour later.
- A Nebraska police officer was shot in the chest and killed by another officer during a defensive tactics training exercise. The .45 caliber handgun had been reloaded during a break in training. The officer who fired the shot was not aware it would be used later in the day.
- A Louisiana police officer was shot and killed during a training exercise at the police academy. Another officer shot the police officer in the chest during a felony car stop scenario. All weapons were to be unloaded. It is unknown why a live round was in the gun during the exercise.
- A Louisiana police lieutenant was accidentally shot and killed by a fellow officer during a drug arrest. A task force comprised of several law enforcement agencies was taking down a vehicle occupied with drug dealers. The lieutenant was attempting to control and pat down a combative suspect on the ground. Another officer covering the suspect with a handgun, applied too much pressure to the trigger and accidentally shot the lieutenant in the head.
- An Illinois police officer was accidentally shot and killed during a training accident. The officer was demonstrating a disarming technique when the officer he was working with grabbed his weapon and fired. The assisting officer was unaware that it had been reloaded. Four days later, while showing officers what

happened, a captain from the same department, accidentally shot and killed himself. The captain removed the magazine from his weapon but forgot to take out the chambered round.

- A New York police sergeant was accidentally shot and killed by another officer while executing a search warrant. When gunfire began inside the residence, the sergeant was mistakenly shot and died at the scene.
- A Virginia SWAT officer was shot by a SWAT teammate during a training exercise. The round struck the officer in the abdomen, below his vest.
- A California police officer was killed when he was shot in the side during a multi-jurisdictional training exercise aboard an Amtrak train. The officers in the exercise were supposed to have unloaded weapons.
- A California police officer was shot and killed by a fellow officer during the execution of a high-risk search warrant. The officer's team was serving a warrant at a house thought to be occupied by three heavily armed drug dealers. The house was subsequently found to be unoccupied. Smoke grenades had been deployed, reducing visibility. The officer was in a room when a fellow officer mistook him for a suspect with a gun. The officer was shot with a shotgun and died 30 minutes later at a local hospital. His wife sued the SWAT supervisor, the police department, and the city. She settled with the city for **\$3,500,000**. The United States Court of Appeals, Ninth Circuit held that the police department “acted with deliberate indifference to maintenance, training, and control of its SWAT teams, and that such indifference was proximate cause of sergeant’s violation of officer’s Fourth and Fourteenth Amendment rights, stated cause of action under 1983.U.S.C.A. Const. Amend 4, 14: 42 U.S.C.A. 1983.”

These incidents are devastating for the officers, their families, and the agencies involved. Officers who were shot, officers who accidentally fired their weapons, witnesses and teammates all become victims having to live with this trauma for the rest of their lives. In addition, an occurrence of this type of incident can tarnish the hard-earned reputation of even the best law enforcement agency.

Officers and team leaders must speak-up immediately and acknowledge when breaches of safety protocol are observed. Supervisors and commanders must address these concerns to ensure injury and loss of life does not occur. The cost of proper training should not affect officer safety or operational concerns. In addition, the resulting liability from insufficient training standards will far exceed the cost of any training program.

Training Cost Factors

Budgetary constraints affect training. The number of officers requiring training, overtime considerations, the ability to attend outside agency training programs or employ outside instructors and equipment costs (targets, bullets, weapons, etc.) are all integral components of a training budget. The size of a training budget will be directly related to departmental size and operational requirements.

Fiscal conservatives oftentimes attempt to restrict the ability for officers to train properly. Administrators must consider the legal and financial consequences for failure to provide safe and effective training for their officers. The following judicial awards demonstrate the court’s willingness to hold law enforcement agencies liable for failure to properly train and supervise their officers.

- A woman with a knife who approached an officer fighting with her brother was awarded \$6 million for the officers' actions in shooting her eight times. The jury found that the city failed to adequately train and supervise its officers. *Willingham v. Boynton Beach*, U.S. Dist. Ct. Miami Fla., April 11, 1998, reported in *The New York Times*, National Edition, p. 16 (April 12, 1998).
- The County of Los Angeles was liable for \$750,000 as a result of an off-duty deputy sheriff's accidental shooting of another bar patron during an altercation outside bar. The suit claimed the county did not adequately train deputies on securing their guns while off-duty or responding while off-duty, to challenges. *Huffman v. County of Los Angeles*, CV95-4071-HLH, U.S. Dist. Ct., Los Angeles, Calif, reported in *LA Daily Journal*, p. 2 (Oct 18, 1996).

- The County and deputy were found liable for the accidental shooting death of the deputy's partner. An award in the amount of \$1 million in damages and \$636,800 in attorneys' fees were issued in a case where the plaintiffs alleged the deputy received no firearms training. *Carr v. Hicks*, U.S. Dist. Ct., WD Tenn, No 89-3090 ML/B, Nov 9, 1993, 37 (7). ATLA L.Rptr. 257 (Sept 1994).
- The estate of man shot by officers entering trailer without announcing themselves during the execution of a search warrant received a \$950,000 settlement. The suit claimed that the county failed to properly train officers in the use of their weapons. *Bryant v. County of Dodge*, U.S. Dist. Ct., ED Wis, No 95-C-0526, Apr 25, 1996, reported in 39 ATLA L.Rptr. No 7, p. 273 (Sept 1996).
- A jury awarded \$200,000 to an arrestee for an officer's alleged use of excessive force during the arrest. The city and police chief were found liable for having a policy of inadequate training, supervision, and discipline. *Hogan v. Franco*, 896 F.Supp. 1313 (NDNY 1995).
- The family of a man shot and killed by officers when he lunged at them with knife received a \$500,000 settlement. The city and police chief were found liable due to inadequate training and supervision of police department employees. *Garcia v. City of Robinson*, U.S. Dist. Ct., WD Tex, No W-93-CA-415, Sept 14, 1995, reported in 39 ATLA L. Rep.No 1, pg 15 (Feb 1996).
- The District of Columbia was liable for \$425,046.67 in the shooting of an arrestee by an officer. The award was based on inadequate training in extra jurisdictional arrest authority, physical training and disarmament training. *Parker v. District of Columbia*, 850 F.2d 708 (DC Cir. 1988).
- Liability was imposed for failure to place a police officer that was unfit for his assignment into a non-sensitive position after numerous disciplinary reports had been brought to the attention of the supervisor. Under this theory of negligence, administrators must be aware of the capabilities and inadequacies of their employees to learn and develop these skills prior to assignment. The concept of administrative negligence had historically been directed toward excessive use of force in this area. However, the concept has been expanded to include the failure to establish, maintain and enforce standards. Liability can be incurred for negligent supervision, *Moon v. Winfield*, 383 F.Supp 31 (N.D. Ill. 1974).
- The plaintiff, who had been arrested by police officers, fell down several times while in custody and responded incoherently when asked if she required medical attention; no medical attention was ever provided. The plaintiff was later released from custody and taken by her family to the hospital where she was treated for several emotional ailments. She brought action against the City of Canton under 42 USCS § 1983 for violating the plaintiff's right, under the due process clause of the Federal Constitution's Fourteenth Amendment, to receive necessary medical attention while in police custody. Shift commanders responsible for making a determination if medical attention was required were not provided any special training to make such determinations. The United States Supreme Court held that failure-to-train liability is proper "only where the failure to train amounts to deliberate indifference to the rights of persons with whom the police come into contact." It also held that inadequate training could serve as a basis for liability only where the failure to train amounts to deliberate indifference by policy makers of the agency. In adopting the deliberate indifference standard, the court explained that inadequate training applies when the need for more or different training is obvious and failure to implement such training is likely to result in constitutional violations. The court further noted that officers must receive ongoing training for typical and recurrent situations that face the officer. The case was remanded back to district court. *City of Canton v. Harris*, 489 U.S. 378, 109 S.Ct. 1197, 103 L.Ed. 2d 412 (1989).
- In § 1983 action against the county, its sheriff and several deputies, the United States District Court, Western District of Washington, entered judgment on the jury verdict finding the defendants liable for damages for excessive use of force used while arresting citizens in four separate incidents. The defendants appealed the verdict. The Court of Appeals upheld the verdict and found that: (1) the sheriff was the official policy maker regarding law enforcement practices; (2) the county's failure to adequately train its deputies as to the constitutional limits of use of force was deliberate indifference to the safety of

county inhabitants as matter of law for purposes of § 1983 liability; and (3) the evidence supported an award of punitive damages. The court awarded punitive damages only against the individual deputies, totaling \$320,000. It awarded \$528,000 in compensatory damages against all of the individual deputies and the County. The district court awarded \$323,559.65 in attorneys' fees, expenses and costs to plaintiffs. The issue is not whether the officers had received any training--most of the deputies involved had some training, even if it was minimal at best--rather the issue is the adequacy of that training. *Davis v. Mason County*, 927 F. 2d 1473 (CA9 1991).

An understanding of department liability is critical to the development of a tactical team. Supervisors and team members need even more specialized training to properly respond to inherent dangers. The potential monetary repercussions will far exceed any investment in training.

Solutions

Once we understand that these are not isolated incidents, but a direct result of improper training, inadequate/neglected safety standards, or poor execution of operational objectives we can address solutions. Law enforcement and military agencies must develop training programs for their officers. These programs must incorporate realistic training and objectives based on operational responsibilities, expectations, and officer safety. Officers should become proficient at each level of their training before advancing. In other words, prior to conducting live-fire entry team training for the first time, start with empty weapon exercises. As proficiency and understanding of goals and objectives increase, difficulty can also increase.

The use of blank and simulated ammunition can be introduced. When officers are proficient, single person live-fire entries working toward the goal of entire team live-fire entries and room/building clearing exercises can be conducted. The ultimate SWAT exercise would consist of a live-fire sniper initiated entry with an entire SWAT team entering and clearing a building, engaging hostile targets while not engaging images of hostages and innocent people. For patrol officer training, work toward the goal of multiple officers clearing a building on a suspicious situation or active-shooter response, using live-fire when necessary.

An in-depth analysis of training concepts and protocol will be covered in a future article dedicated to the development of training programs. This critical area is often overlooked by law enforcement agencies, but is the foundation of an efficient and effective operational response.

Training Safety

In conjunction with developing a training program, safety standards and protocol must be established. The following safety standards and protocol are followed at all Operational Tactics, Inc. training programs and schools.

Operational Tactics, Inc. Training Safety Standards and Protocol

- Prior to conducting any scenario or training exercise, the dispatch center of the jurisdiction where the training is to be conducted will be notified. If neighboring law enforcement jurisdictions are in close proximity or could reasonably be expected to come in contact with the training/scenario site, then their dispatch centers will be contacted as well.
- Whenever possible, "Police Training In Progress" signs will be placed on access roads at the scenario site.
- A designated safety vehicle equipped with a mobile telephone will be parked in close proximity at the training location.
- Depending upon the total number of personnel to be trained, a minimum of two people will be assigned as safety officers.

- The safety officers will have overlapping responsibilities with both being required to conduct separate weapons and ammunition checks of all participants.
- All participants are advised that they are safety officers as well. Any unsafe act must be reported immediately. Participants also have the authority to halt the training exercise to address any concerns.
- Participants are advised to keep their fingers off of the trigger unless preparing to fire and to be aware of proper target identification and backdrop.
- Participants must wear and carry all necessary operational gear with them at all times (except live ammunition unless instructed).
- Officers arriving late or leave and later return to the training/scenario may not participate.
- If a break is taken during the training, the inspection process is conducted again in its entirety.
- Prior to the commencement of training exercises/scenarios, participants and observers line up in a safe direction and unload all weapons.
- Participants must present ALL weapons to instructors/safety officers for visual and physical inspection. Three instructors/safety officers are responsible for conducting this safety check. If there are only two designed safety officers present, then one participant will be a designated safety officer to assist in conducting this weapons check. Unless a live-fire exercise is to be conducted, live ammunition must not be present in any weapon, gear, pockets, bags, or other equipment used by the participants.
- Record serial numbers of all weapons to be used in the training session, after they have been checked for live ammunition.
- When using vehicles as part of a training exercise, they must be checked for live ammunition as well. Efforts must be made to restrict access to any area where live ammunition could be present.
- If live-fire training is to be conducted, ALL weapons are visually and physically inspected by instructors/safety officers. Instructions are given to the participants to wait for the specific command to load and fire their weapons. They are again instructed to ensure proper target identification and backdrop, prior to discharging their weapons. Prior to commencement of the exercise, all training areas must be cleared of personnel who may have inadvertently entered a danger zone. Ballistic vests and helmets must be worn at all times by participants and safety officers (except for exercises conducted exclusively for snipers).
- Officers/trainees will not be permitted to fire alone on the range. At least one safety officer or instructor must be within view and voice contact of any officer/trainee conducting live-fire training on the range.
- If blank rounds are to be used, one round is fired to demonstrate the degree of force discharged from the weapon. Participants are instructed to ensure their weapons are not pointed directly at anyone within 20 feet.
- For stalking exercises where blank rounds are used, officers/trainees will not sight-in instructors acting as spotters/suspects down range. Targets will be posted in the area where the spotters/suspects are located for officers/trainees to sight-in and engage. Anyone observed sighting in a spotter/suspect will be removed from the training and be subject to disciplinary action.

- If simulated ammunition is to be used, a demonstration of the impact after being discharged from the weapon is conducted, prior to deployment. Participants are instructed to only fire sufficient rounds to stop the threat. Participants and safety officers must wear eye protection and have all exposed skin covered with clothing. Groin protection such as an athletic cup or thick towel must be used for males as well as females.
- For night-fire exercises, all participants and instructors must be accounted for when returning from target areas on the range. Safety officers must also check the areas and a roll call conducted to ensure no one has been left behind.
- For shoot-house exercises, all live-fire areas must be cleared of personnel, prior to the commencement of training. Observers are positioned in a designated safe location or directly behind the participants. They must have direct voice contact with the participants. Participants are instructed not to inadvertently point their weapons at teammates in front of them or to turn around with their weapons in hand. Once an area has been passed, any targets missed and subsequently observed may not be engaged.
- At the conclusion of the training day, officers will reload their duty handguns in a safe direction, prior to leaving the training site.

Safety standards and protocols must be enacted prior to conducting any training. The above recommendations are designed to promote safe weapons handling while conducting realistic training.

Operational Safety

Law enforcement officer safety should be the most important factor on any critical incident. It has been suggested in the tactical community that the lives of hostages are more important than the lives of rescuing officers. While the author recognizes the inherent risks associated with hostage rescue, he suggests that the primary concern of ANY operation should be officer safety.

If officers are killed deploying on an operation, the entire operation may be compromised. Dead or seriously injured officers are unable to rescue anyone. In order to avoid unnecessary risks, safety issues should be considered in the formulation of an operational plan. However, when developing an operational plan, an understanding of safety standards and protocol must be established.

Operational Tactics, Inc. Recommended Tactical Team Deployment Safety Standards and Protocols

- Whenever possible, all law enforcement personnel involved in the operation should attend the incident briefing. Exceptions to this protocol would include incidents requiring exigent deployment of officers or pre-deployment of surveillance personnel.
- Officers will be briefed and updated on team member positioning and changes throughout the incident.
- All officers except snipers, who deploy on a tactical operation will have law enforcement identification clearly visible on their outer garments. This identification will consist of any two of the following items: badge, patch, raid jacket with POLICE or SHERIFF'S DEPARTMENT printed in the front and back, or any item readily identifiable by all department members and citizens. Snipers will carry a badge and their official identification cards in a pocket or bag.
- Weapons such as shotguns that can be used to discharge less-lethal munitions will be marked to visibly differentiate them from lethal weapons. Officers deploying with less-lethal weapon systems will ensure live-ammunition is not present.
- Prior to leaving the staging or briefing area all officers will ensure their weapons are loaded, a communications check is conducted, and an incident overview has been provided.

- Prior to final deployment, officers will be instructed to take their weapons off of the safe position, to keep their fingers off of the trigger unless preparing to fire, and to be aware of proper target identification and backdrop.
- Law enforcement snipers should deploy in two-person teams.
- Once officers have relayed their perimeter position to the command post, they will advise the command post of future changes in their position.
- At the conclusion of any deployment where additional weapons were loaded, these weapons will be unloaded in a safe direction and stored per department policy.

This protocol should be incorporated into a detailed operational plan, determined by the exact circumstances and nature of each critical incident. Tactical team training, policy, tactics, available equipment, personnel and training are all factors affecting a final plan. The creation and implementation of an operational plan will enhance the ability to successfully resolve critical incidents with minimum risk to officer's lives.

In this article the author has attempted to educate the law enforcement and military community on potential training and operational hazards and provide a variety of solutions to avoid these tragedies. In interviewing many agencies involved in training and operational accidents, the author had the opportunity to speak with commanders, SWAT team members, witnesses to shootings, and officers directly involved in the shootings. There is a deep sense of regret, embarrassment, psychological trauma and in many cases, a desire to restrict information regarding the circumstances of their occurrence for personal and legal reasons.

The information presented is for educational purposes only. It is not designed to limit training or law enforcement response procedures and options. We have an overwhelming obligation to provide educational resources and information that could save lives, in particular, the lives of brother and sister officers. If we develop the attitude that IT can't happen to us, then be assured IT will. In addition, the excuse that tactical officers are so highly training that safety protocol does not need to be followed is absurd. We must not assume anything and ensure that all officers adhere to established safety standards. The entrustment of all lives is everyone's interminable responsibility.

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