

Obsolescence: The Police Firearms Training Dilemma

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In an era largely defined by rapid technological advances, we've become somewhat accustomed to how quickly many of our tools and entertainment indulgences have become obsolete. The Sony Walkman™ - a must-have of the late 1980s, gave way to portable CD players and then Apple iPods™. Analog audio and video formats gave way to digital formats. CRT displays, even the better ones, have given way to LCD and Plasma screens.

The law enforcement community has embraced many useful advances, such as dashboard cameras, MDTs and Tasers. Cutting-edge LED flashlights are rapidly replacing those with incandescent bulb technology. We've seen GPS technology being integrated into sophisticated crime mapping software and hardware. We've also witnessed officers transitioning from revolvers to some of the newest generation pistol designs, and we've seen shotguns largely being supplanted by AR15 rifles, many equipped with Rail Interface Systems and electronic sights.

But, when it comes to the way in which we train police officers to assure their own survival, and the survival of others, we've clung to old, problematic paradigms. Obsolescence is usually self-evident within the technological realm, and it should be equally as obvious in the police training realm. If what we're training officers to do isn't remediating persistent problems associated with decision-making skills, we, as police trainers, have become part of the problem.

How Did We Get Here?



Police training, especially police firearms training, has witnessed an enormous amount of commercialization over the last two decades. Where there was once a mere handful of police firearms training entities (i.e., the NRA-LEAD, Gunsite, S&W Academy, etc.), there are now literally hundreds of commercial training establishments, both regional and national. They're all competing for slices of a pie (police training budgets) that hasn't gotten much bigger over the last two decades. So, in an attempt to distinguish themselves from the pack, competing training companies feel compelled to "out-SWAT" each other. How often do you see police training marketed with imagery of trainees in black BDUs, Kevlar helmets and bloused combat boots? Or, perhaps more tellingly, how often don't you see police training marketed with a SWAT motif?

Beyond the marketing imagery lies the real problem. We know, from even a casual perusal of annual Uniform Crime Reports (UCR) and Law Enforcement Officers Killed and Assaulted (LEOKA) publications, that we're losing officers to similar mistakes that we've always lost officers to. Much of that has to do with the basic nature of

policing, which doesn't change much. We're duty-bound to take some risks and place ourselves in some predicaments that we've rather not be in. But, when we look critically at what we see the vast majority of commercial trainers impressing upon officers, we're likely to see aggressive, proactive techniques geared heavily toward active-shooter scenarios. This should come as no surprise, since many of the most influential commercial trainers have DOD backgrounds – and little if any legitimate police experience.

So that there is no misunderstanding here – there should be no doubt or misunderstanding about the importance of active-shooter training. The issue is to what degree active-shooter training reflects the challenges that patrol officers are most likely to face. Undoubtedly, much of the active-shooter training being provided to officers is fundamentally sound, and it inarguably imbues skills and tactical reasoning in officers that has substantive value. But, as the LEOKA table (below) indicates, it is barely relevant to beat and plainclothes officers, when viewed within the totality of circumstances associated with officers being slain in the line of duty.

Law Enforcement Officers Feloniously Killed 1996-2005											
Circumstance	Total	1996	1997	1998	1999	2000	2001¹	2002	2003	2004	2005
Total	575	61	70	61	42	51	70	56	52	57	55
Disturbance calls	95	4	13	16	5	8	13	9	10	10	7
Bar fights, person with firearm, etc.	36	1	3	7	4	4	5	4	5	1	2
Family quarrels	59	3	10	9	1	4	8	5	5	9	5
Arrest situations	147	26	22	15	9	12	24	10	8	13	8
Burglaries in progress/pursuing burglary suspects	18	3	5	0	0	3	3	0	1	2	1
Robberies in progress/pursuing robbery suspects	50	12	11	3	3	1	4	4	1	7	4
Drug-related matters	28	3	1	7	2	3	8	3	1	0	0
Attempting other arrests	51	8	5	5	4	5	9	3	5	4	3
Civil disorders (mass disobedience, riot, etc.)	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Handling, transporting, custody of prisoners	18	1	3	4	2	2	2	0	2	1	1
Investigating suspicious persons/circumstances	71	13	8	5	7	6	8	6	4	7	7
Ambush situations	102	6	12	10	6	10	9	17	9	15	8
Entrapment/premeditation	40	2	5	4	4	2	3	4	6	6	4
Unprovoked attacks	62	4	7	6	2	8	6	13	3	9	4
Investigative activities (searches, interviews, etc.)	8	0	2	0	0	0	0	0	2	0	4
Handling mentally deranged persons	13	1	1	0	0	0	3	4	0	2	2
Traffic pursuits/stops	102	10	8	10	8	13	8	10	14	6	15
Felony vehicle stops	42	6	3	5	4	4	5	6	4	0	5
Traffic violation stops	60	4	5	5	4	9	3	4	10	6	10
Tactical situations (barricaded offender, hostage taking, high-risk entry, etc.)	19	0	1	1	5	0	3	0	3	3	3

¹The 72 deaths that resulted from the events of September 11, 2001, are not included in this table.

As you can see, about 3% (19) of all officers slain (575) during this ten-year period were sorted into the "Tactical Situations" category. It might be safe to say that a substantial number of that (3%) number of officers were assigned to specialized units (SWAT, HRT, etc.) when slain. Compare this "tactical" category with the 25% ratio of officers slain in "Arrest Situations," the 18% slain in "Ambush Situations," the 16% slain in "Disturbance Calls," and the 12% slain in "Investigating Suspicious

Persons/Circumstances" incidents. Only three other categories have a lower ratio of officers slain than the "Tactical Situations" category.

My point?

The most prevalent activities associated with officer fatalities continue to be almost exclusively those that are associated with the core responsibilities of beat officers and plainclothes personnel. This isn't rocket science. Nor is it difficult to grasp the fact that selling officers what they need (versus what they think they want) isn't an "easy-sell" for police training merchants. It's easier, for instance, to sell officers training geared toward active-shooter scenarios than it is to sell training oriented toward vehicle stops, pedestrian stops, domestic disputes, etc. To some extent, it's also probably easier for agency trainers to convince their administration that active-shooter training is a more compelling concern, especially in the aftermath of a nationally-hyped school shooting that has occurred. Again, this isn't to suggest that active-shooter training isn't justifiable. I'm merely suggesting that other needs are likely more relevant and compelling.

As much as the police profession has "changed" over the last two decades, little has changed with regard to how police are feloniously slain. It's easy to fall prey to the slick marketing apparatus and the sex appeal associated with "quasi-SWAT" training. Most of us would like to be identified with having training similar to an elite unit within our agency. But, are you truly addressing the core competencies necessary to best-perform the functions of a beat or plainclothes officer? Probably not.

Where Police Training Needs to Be!

Two decades have passed since renowned deadly force researcher, James Fyfe (retired NYPD Lieutenant, now deceased), lamented the so-called "Split-Second Syndrome,"¹ whereby officers feel compelled to make split-second deadly force decisions, often due to poor tactical planning. In the twenty-two years since Fyfe opined about this phenomenon, we've done little to enhance officer's situational awareness, or their ability to reasonably decipher reliable threat cues. Our training emphasis has largely been expended on speed; speed out of the holster and speed on-target – perhaps aggravating the very concern that James Fyfe chronicled. Situational awareness and seasoned deciphering of threat cues may not eliminate the need for speed, but might mitigate the need considerably.

There has been so much emphasis on speed in recent years that we've trained officers to act faster than they've been trained to assess and mitigate risk. The emphasis on speed from the holster seems desirable, as does one's ability to engage a threat quickly. However, emphasis on speed alone has become a problem. We're seeing grossly inadequate muzzle and trigger-finger discipline in officers as a consequence of emphasizing speed on paper and steel targets. "Speed Kills," but I'm

¹ Fyfe, J.J. (1986), "The split-second syndrome and other determinants of police violence", in Campbell, A.T. and Gibbs, J.J. (Eds), *Violent Transactions*, Basil Blackwell, Oxford.

afraid we're painfully learning the downside to that adage as trainers. The speed we're encouraging on paper and steel seldom (if ever) translates into lives saved but frequently seems to contribute to a plethora of avoidable errors. We've seen some progress in addressing decision-making in training but we've just not addressed it properly or with adequate resources.

"Contrary to the prevailing police training emphasis, poor judgment gets officers killed, seriously injured and sued far more frequently than poor marksmanship does."

While recently attending a police "Crisis Intervention Team" training course in Connecticut, I listened while one of the lecturers asked the class how many hours of firearms training they received on an annual basis. The answer, almost without exception, was three (3) hours per year!!! The reason given: that's all that the State of Connecticut requires for in-service firearms training! While the national average for police firearms training probably ranges between 4 to 16 hours per annum, it continues to focus most scarce training resources toward shooting at paper and steel. Little is addressed under low light conditions and little is done to address and enhance officer decision-making skills.

Though I've been a tireless advocate of better resourcing police training for nearly as long as I've been a trainer, I'm fully aware that things aren't likely to change much in my remaining lifetime. However, rather than resign myself to becoming part of the problem, I'm advocating a recalibration of the way that we train officers to use deadly force. For many years, I've embraced the traditional three-tiers of firearms training;

1. Static Level: live-fire, for marksmanship enhancement
2. Dynamic Level: live-fire, to enhance cover utilization, movement, engaging moving targets, etc.
3. Simulation Level: scenario simulation (using RAP4 paintball, AirSoft, Simunition FX™ etc.) to enhance decision-making and situational awareness.

Given what is painfully apparent today, that paradigm must be drastically reconsidered and systematically revised. Since we've not seen greater time allocated for deadly force training over the last twenty years, the time expended on the "static" level should be minimal. It should be merely enough time to get officers safely oriented to the weapon and to adequately address basic marksmanship. From that point forward, get your trainees away from paper and steel targets!!!

Why?

1. You want your officers to learn the importance of cover utilization: "Targets" that "shoot back" at trainees provide the best inducement to learn proper cover utilization!!

2. You want your officers to understand the importance of verbal commands: Your "targets" should be capable of interacting with verbal commands!!!
3. You want your officers to understand the relationship between distance and survivability: Your "targets" should be able to abruptly (and naturally) posture, turn, and (at times) lunge at your trainees!
4. You want your officers to understand how to discern when (and how) "furtive movement" is a reliable indicator of an impending attack: Your "targets" should be able to reflect the types of behavioral nuances that reliably predict an impending attack!
5. You want your officers to be able to reliably identify a lethal threat under low light conditions: Your officers should be exposed to dimly lit "targets" that interact with trainees with various objects that are often mistaken for weapons!!!

How Can This Paradigm-Shift In Training Be Best Accomplished?

Once your trainees have acquired basic marksmanship skills, get them away from live-fire as much as possible. It restricts the number of core judgment competencies that you can address safely. Live-fire limits your creativity in terms of trainee interactions with target mediums. Pop-up, turning and moving 3-D targets are nice, but they fail to adequately address the most vexing problems officers routinely face on the street. Live-fire almost always restricts your angles of fire – even if you have an expensive, 360 degree "shoot-house." The more realism you try to inject into live-fire training, the more you'll find yourself cursed by safety constraints.

Use Simunition FX, Airsoft or RAP4 paintguns!!!!

Almost EVERYTHING beyond (live-fire) "qualification" should involve simulation training! Cover drills should have trainees "shooting" at other trainees. Moving target training should utilize other trainees as "movers" that can shoot back. Low light training should stress threat identification – with role players, not paper targets!

The most salient concerns when considering a transition to this new training paradigm are;

1. Is your training staff prepared for the challenge?
2. Will your training facility afford you adequate safety and flexibility for such activities?
3. Which equipment approach is best suited to your budgetary constraints?

Getting your staff properly trained for this regimen is relatively easy. There are many schools available that address training with Simunition, paintguns, Airsoft and video-based simulators. Airsoft is obviously the least expensive route, though it lacks a

"marking" capability that I find essential in scenario-based training. An agency can often commit to an Airsoft training format for less than \$1,000, depending on the size of the agency and whether long-guns will also be addressed. Simunition™ and RAP4™ paintguns are also viable program alternatives, though they'll cost more to start and sustain.

Video-based training is also a viable alternative. In light of the results of a groundbreaking study² recently completed by the Police Policy Studies Council, video-based training is proving to be of significant value in substantially diminishing the most egregious judgmental errors made by beat officers.

Although startup costs are more demanding, video-based simulators will enable you to train officers onsite, without an indoor range, without long drives to an outdoor range, without concerns about training-related injury, without concerns about outdoor weather conditions, and without expending increasingly expensive ammunition. When you tally up all of the advantages that video-based simulators tend to offer, their initial costs are often offset by what they offer. If you wish to employ a cost-effective simulator that accommodates both laser and live-fire capabilities, the CAPS™ system (www.caps-inc.com) is a very good alternative, and the laser-based system can be acquired in the range of \$20,000.

However, if employing a video-based simulator, it should be integrated with a force-on-force training regimen. Since video-based training doesn't adequately address spatial awareness or situational dynamics (critical spatial factors in vehicular stops, climbing stairwells, separating people, pat-downs, verbal exchanges, etc.), I remain partial to force-on-force role playing.

Obviously, we can address everything at the simulation level of training that we once did at the dynamic level. And, we can address the most critical issues much more effectively at the interactive level. The most essential training issues continue to be;

1. Marksmanship
2. Low light navigation, threat location and identification.
3. "Threat Vector Management™"
4. Distance/cover dynamics
5. Verbal skills
6. Multiple officer and multiple suspect dynamics
7. Decisive engagement (weapon) skills
8. Reloading/immediate action

There are of course caveats to heed. Don't make the mistake commonly being made by people marketing (commercial) police training. Don't expend valuable time executing exotic scenarios that your officers aren't likely to face. The more your scenarios reflect the tasks that your officers most frequently perform, and address the risks they most

² Aveni, Thomas (2008), "A Critical Analysis of the Police Use of Deadly Force Under Ambiguous Circumstances." www.theppsc.org

commonly face, the better your extremely limited training resources have been expended. Perhaps just as importantly, assure that your training addresses the occupational errors your officers seem to be making most frequently – no matter how mundane they seem to be.

What if your agency is among the few that allocates more than 8-16 hours of firearms training per year? I'd still emphasize judgment-oriented training with most of that time - with at least 80% of my allocated resources.

Remember, training interprets and affirms agency policy. It's up to police trainers to elucidate agency policy parameters while enhancing occupational safety. That's obviously no small task, though it is often a thankless one.

Conclusion

As trainers, perhaps our greatest fear is that of teaching tactics or techniques that won't work for officers when they are utilized on the street. Over the years, I can easily recall a great deal of training doctrine that has been abandoned due to poor practical efficiency on the street. Control and restraint techniques have probably undergone the most radical transformation, and yet they are (from all outward appearances) still not where they need to be. The low light tactics and techniques being commercially marketed to police remain extremely problematic, which might in part explain why so-called "mistake-of-fact shootings" and "contagious-fire" incidents remain so commonplace at night.

The epiphany awaiting most firearms trainers is that most of what they've been allocating precious time and resources toward accomplishing has yielded little if any benefit on the street. The live-fire, paper-and-steel approach is worthwhile ONLY if your agency allocates 40 or more hours per year to firearms training. And even then, paper and steel are of limited value as training mediums. Trainers profess the desire to "establish core competency" in critical skills and yet fail to establish effective methodologies to accomplish that goal within the limited means they've been afforded.

If nothing else, trainers must conceptualize the fact that what saves officer's lives most reliably isn't an ability to unholster with lightning speed, or fire and reload with the efficiency of a competitive shooter. Situational awareness and critical decision-making saves lives and minimizes the legal repercussions associated with employing deadly force. Trainers know this – they've always known this, but they've failed to constructively address this reality in the limited hours they've been allocated to train officers.

A paradigm shift in training emphasis is long overdue. Put your BDUs, Kevlar helmets and balaclavas in storage for a while. Let's begin to re-focus on the mundane activities that we continue to see the vast majority of officers being feloniously killed and assaulted in.