

2: *Why Cops Die:* *Contributions or Compromise to Officer Safety*

The most important goals of training police officers in the use of proper tactics are the successful mission to protect and serve and the prevention of assault against officers and other innocent people. Dating from the Chinese philosopher Sun Tzu's classic *The Art of War*, the guiding purpose of the study and practice of tactics has been to gain and maintain a position of advantage and control prior to and during a tactical encounter.

It is within the *application* of tactics, however, that the end result will be determined: who wins and who is vanquished, who lives and who dies, whether the good people are protected and whether the police officers will go home at the end of their watch. As Sergeant Ed Deuel of the Huntington Beach, CA Police Department says:

We often compromise our own safety to make the case. We don't want to be criticized in court or embarrassed by a weak report, so we give the suspect freedom to act so that we can justifiably react or justifiably search. In reality, we knew this person was dangerous from the moment we saw him, but we can't just draw our weapon and search people and their cars without probable cause. So we act cool and stupid and we

don't call for backup when we should. We will look weak in front of our peers if we constantly call for backup. Yet, aggressive police officers are constantly hunting parolees. If I call for a backup too often I will get a nickname. If I don't call for backup when I should, I end up calling myself lucky.¹

Approximately twenty-five years ago, a young police officer, Rich Wemmer, was assigned as an Academy instructor to teach tactics for the Los Angeles Police Department. He found that recruit officers were, generally, easy to deal with because they were a "blank slate." It was during in-service training that his task became more difficult, because he found that officers had developed experience in the field. Officers' field experience had formed **habits** in how they performed their work that were difficult to alter or break, because those patterns of response had been successful. Nothing bad had happened, so officers approached different circumstances the same way.

At this time, a group of instructors talked about the challenges of in-service training and the frustration they all experienced with the murders and deaths of police officers: "Why can't we look at a range of incidents?" they asked. "What was done well, what could be done better, what the suspect did that put officers in danger." The instructors studied the murders of California police officers and interviewed officers who had survived officer-involved shootings. Their beliefs were corroborated by the facts discovered during their investigation of these incidents: the great majority of incidents that an officer encountered were survivable and winnable—in other words, the officer controlled his or her own destiny.²

The instructors found that the use of proper tactics required, among other things, the ability to make tactical decisions. It was in *the making of decisions during conditions of threat and what the officer did to control subject/suspect encounters* that the safety and survivability of police officers was achieved or lost.³

Experts in the field of police tactics and officer safety have developed a tremendous amount of information regarding successful

assaults against police officers. They have continually seen the need to train officers' minds to make tactical decisions from this body of knowledge. They know that in the best of circumstances officers have options, that their minds see a vision of tactical options from which the officer selects the solution most likely to increase the likelihood of success and survival.

The experts have studied suspect behaviors prior to and during assaults against police officers. They know that “reading the scene” is a critical task for the officer: to watch what is unusual about a person’s actions; to ascertain what the suspect’s reactions to the officer’s presence are. Are they compliant? Is there danger? Has this individual committed a crime? What does the officer have to contend with? How can the officer act to increase safety?

These experts have felt concern that officers appear to have the tendency to rush in, walk forward, and approach the suspect—to make something happen. They have found that there are many incidents in which a suspect has deceived the officer, and that by rushing in the officer has not used all the resources that could have been applied to this circumstance.⁴

In a study of California law enforcement officers killed and assaulted in the line of duty between 1990 and 1994—performed to establish “an information base from which training curricula, policies, and procedures [could] be developed or enhanced to curtail the injury or death of California police officers”⁵—it was discovered that thirty-one police officers were feloniously murdered in the course of their duties. Each of these incidents was studied, and peers, supervisors, and co-workers of the murdered officers were interviewed. In these cases, a number of errors in officer safety were reported as the

probable attitude or mindset of the victim peace officers just before they were murdered: The officer was overconfident; the officer was too aggressive; an attitude of carelessness or

complacency was reported; a lack of alertness or disregard for danger signs was reported; the officer maintained poor positioning; the officer relaxed too soon; a poor search technique was used; the officer was hesitant to use appropriate force; poor use of cover was reported; and the officer used improper or no use of handcuffs.⁶

In an additional study of the felonious murders of police officers, an unintended set of “behavioral descriptors” was discovered in each of fifty-four cases studied. The study reported:

It was only after several interviews with victim officers’ peers and supervisors that it became apparent that similar behavioral descriptors were commonly used to describe these victim officers.... *Each of the 54 victim officers possessed several of these behavioral characteristics....* (emphasis added)

The consistently occurring characteristics of feloniously murdered victim officers were as follows. These officers were friendly to everyone and well liked by the community and department. They tended to use less force than other officers felt they would use in similar circumstances. They were hard-working and generally saw themselves as more service-oriented than other law enforcement personnel. They used force only as a last resort (peers claimed they would use force at an earlier point in similar circumstances). They didn’t follow all the rules, especially in regard to arrest, confrontation with prisoners, traffic stops, and did not wait for backup (when available). The victim officers felt they could “read” others and situations and dropped their guard as a result. They tended to look for “good” in others and were characterized as “laid back” and “easygoing.”⁷

The conclusion one can draw from both the above studies is that police officers’ *decision-making, judgment, and the response tendencies*

controlled by officers' own personality have compromised officers' ability to control the scene—and resulted in the death of an officer. These studies document the need for training and practice that is normally underemphasized in Academy and field training. Examples of such training needs are tools to maintain officers' concentration, vigilance, and accurate perceptions and judgment during threatening, unpredicted, or chaotic circumstances. In addition, officers need to be trained in techniques to engage in actions required by the elements they encounter at a scene, not their previously used personal “style” or personality.

Implications for Police Training in Tactics

There is an underlying purpose in efforts to teach tactical skills to police officers. The need for the maximal performance of the procedure or skill is an unstated expectation in all police training efforts, so the officer gains mastery in the actual field encounter being trained for. In other words, skills are taught so the officer will be capable of recognizing, assessing, and controlling scenes that contain rapidly changing, chaotic, or unpredictable events in the most proficient manner.

Control of such difficult scenes involves a simple, yet critical task to be performed by the officer. He or she must gain and maintain the initiative-control in any subject encounter in order to achieve mastery, or the subject will seize the initiative to which the officer must now react. **Initiative-control** is the term used to describe the act of taking command and control over the subject as rapidly as is possible and proper. Initiative-control counteracts the disadvantage of the fact that police officers invariably begin their attempts to control a scene somewhat behind the subject or suspect's actions.

Initiative-control is distinguished from the type of circumstance where the officer thinks to him- or herself, “Oh Shit! I didn't expect this.” **Reactive-control** refers to officers' attempts to set order when they were not mentally or physically prepared for the encounter or when events appeared to be “getting away from them.”

A number of reasons exist why officers may not be mentally prepared for the circumstances they encounter in the field. First, many officers have prejudged the characteristics of the contact based solely upon past experiences they have had with similar events, and not from information provided in the current scene. Second, officers may be confronted with unanticipated or rapidly changing elements that they were not apprised of earlier and did not have a readily prepared tactical plan to deal with the new circumstance that was encountered.

The development of a habit pattern of rapid and decisive action by officers is, therefore, required to gain initiative-control. Initiative-control must include a sense of the urgency of time as a critical part of tactical training, so that no delay from expectations, indecision, hesitancy, or concerns places the officer further behind the subject's actions. The consequence of the officer's falling behind the actions of the subject will be the need for officers to use greater levels of force than would have been required had the officer's response been rapid and decisive.

When the threat directed at an officer requires that he or she engage in an extremely rapid response for survival, the officer does not take the time to think consciously about the situation she or he is in. The "conscious" part of the officer's brain shuts down during survival mode. The nervous signals and brain activity that enable the officer to react for self-preservation travel and follow a much quicker reflex arc via the spinal cord (e.g., muscle reflexes). Automatic, reflex activity is an essential part of all types of police work since reaction time is an important variable in officer tactical responses.

However, reaction time in many cases also involves subconscious decision-making in which the officer performs some assessment or judgment. In these cases, reaction time includes both **assessment time** and **decision time**. Both the assessment time and, particularly, the decision time improve through the regular application of training for skill in two fundamentally important but simple mental activities:

concentration and **focusing of attention** upon the important elements in a scene that the officer encounters.

The impact upon an officer of unexpected, rapidly changing, or chaotic circumstances will often be a disruption, disturbance, or lag in time in decision-making and tactical responses until he or she accurately identifies what has to be done. This disruption occurs because the brain experiences a temporary perceptual shock when something serious happens that it wasn't ready for.

Initiative-control requires that the officer achieve mastery of the encounter by engaging in maximal performance under conditions of ambiguous, inconsistent, and/or confusing information and activity. Initiative-control requires that the officer rapidly and accurately perceives the tactical requirements of the scene and engages in decisive action to overcome the inertia brought about by the subject's actions. The officer must react to information gained from the subject's reactions to the officer's presence in order to make effective decisions regarding the levels of control that will be required to achieve mastery and control.

Some of the more recent research findings involving the training of individuals to make decisions under conditions of stress or urgency provide important lessons for tactical instructors in their efforts to develop maximal performance in police officers.⁸

It is relatively simple to teach an officer how to perform a task in a classroom setting. A class has a syllabus and plan where there is specific content being presented and the parameters of the task can be well defined. The students and instructor are able to predict the type of encounter that will be used for training purposes, and the type of tests the officer is subjected to in order to certify his or her skill in that area can be prepared for by using the class curriculum.

The cognitive or mental processing of information at a scene, however, will not occur with the same dynamics or predictability found in the classroom. The officer must retrieve the information presented to them at the scene. The officer must appraise the

information to enable him or her to identify the most important and relevant aspects of the scene (and discard less relevant information). The officer must engage in rapid decision-making to develop the response that will provide him or her with initiative-control in the incident encounter. Thereafter, the officer must engage in decisive actions done as rapidly as possible to maintain initiative-control of the scene.

The proficiency of the officer in managing rapidly changing, chaotic, or unanticipated incidents will require that officers develop **adaptive expertise**. Adaptive expertise permits the individual to recognize changes in task priorities and conditions and the need to shift his or her tactical response.⁹

When officers are presented with the complex task of controlling potentially assaultive subjects, their attainment of maximal performance will require that they have, first, accurate expectations about what to expect from the subject's behaviors and reactions to their presence. Any expectations developed from past events or the officers' current emotional conditions present a possible danger of officers making inaccurate predictions of what they will encounter—instead of ensuring that they actively and accurately process the information they obtain at the current scene to determine their expectations.

Second, officers must have confidence in their ability to cope with the stressors they encounter. Third, officers must have the continuing opportunity to practice dealing with the stressors at the scene so that appropriate skills will be both developed and maintained over time. If any of these elements are missing, one cannot expect the officer to attain maximal performance of the tasks necessary to achieve officer safety and proper control of a scene.¹⁰ Some aspect of the officer's tactical response will be compromised, and resistive or assaultive subjects will gain greater initiative-control within the encounter.

Adaptive expertise entails a deep comprehension of the conceptual nature of the problems the officer encounters, e.g., understanding the dynamics and differing profiles of assaultive

behavior. Skills must be developed in an organized but *flexible* structure. That is, the officer must continue cognitive activity in the face of emergency conditions to enable him or her to register the level of threat encountered as well as any changes in the circumstance. As discussed elsewhere in this book, the part of the brain that is generally shut down when the officer encounters unanticipated elements is the part that registers changes in threat levels and circumstance and the need to shift tactics.

Adaptive expertise requires that officers participate in long-term, guided, and extensive practice experience. Their training must address normative, ongoing situations that will be frequently encountered in interactions with resistive or dangerous subjects. Thereafter, variability, ambiguity, and inconsistencies need to be inserted into the task to force the trainee to stretch his or her learning to a level of competence that permits them to rapidly respond to difficult or unanticipated events. The adaptive growth process occurs when the learning material presented is just beyond the trainee's level of competence. Solving the problems presented in the training then requires the trainee to "stretch" his or her ability and adapt his or her knowledge to new information and skills.

In order for officers to achieve maximal performance of the skills they are trained in, mastery training must be done alongside procedure or skill training because mastery enhances the development of situation awareness and adaptability.

A danger inherent in limiting training methods to procedure training is that the habits developed by experienced officers are used as a mental model from which the officer generates his or her expectations regarding the encounter. Mental models that apply past habits are likely to impede the officer's ability to correctly integrate the currently relevant information necessary to maintain officer safety within unusual tactical encounters. Training efforts must, therefore, provide a *conceptual model* that assists the officer in understanding both *how* and *why* things work. Accurate models

improve performance of complex tasks, and, conversely, inaccurate models decrease task performance.¹¹

Tactical encounters contain highly stressful conditions that have been shown to alter how officers apply the skills and concepts they have learned in training.¹² Therefore, exposing trainees to stressful conditions while they are practicing in event-based training¹³ will enhance the likelihood that officers react decisively and accurately during a stressful event. Training efforts that are performed under low stress conditions will not likely be replicated by officers' actions in the field.

The introduction of *vague, conflicting, or imminent information* at rapid rates during a tactical encounter will increase officers' mental workload. Training *must* replicate these conditions so that the tasks of information retrieval, appraisal of threat conditions, and decision-making can be properly performed under real stress conditions. This will require that training inoculate officers with pre-exposure to the above elements in order to prevent overload, misperception, or inappropriate decision-making. These must be performed under a stressful, but not overwhelming, workload.

The elements encountered in the course of applying police field tactics are, of course, complex and varied, most of them beyond the scope of this book. I certainly lay no claim to being an expert (nor even an intermediate) in the knowledge of police tactics. In the past twenty years, however, I have seen quite a few casualties and have stood over the graves of twenty-three feloniously murdered law enforcement officers, have worked to assist many more officers and their families injured as a result of a felon's assault, and have tried to figure out why the events happened.

To obtain answers useful for police officers, I have studied the possible sources of compromise to officer safety and wellness from a *biopsychosocial*¹⁴ and *clinical*¹⁵ perspective. I do not believe that gaining and maintaining an advantage to ensure officer safety exists in a vacuum that only can be taught using one approach or principle.

Some of the things that compromise officer safety arise from how the officer adapts to or manages the body's biological reaction to alarm or threat. Some come from the officer's psychological reactions to single-episode onset (post-traumatic) and/or cumulative work and organizational stresses (how decision-making is accomplished during emergency conditions, mental activity, judgment, and emotion). And some arise from how the officer applies what he or she has learned and how he or she thinks and acts during stressful, unanticipated, unpredicted, or uncontrolled events.¹⁶

The Biological Response to Alarm

Unlike human beings, engines do not “know” if they're being threatened. Nor do they experience concerns about whether they will survive as an engine or not. When spark and fuel are provided to an engine and it is in sufficient mechanical condition, it functions the way it was designed to. Unlike the simple mechanics of the engine, however, the human being stays alive, in large measure, because of the activation of **survival instincts**. Survival instincts are necessary because they protect against unnatural death and prevent the extinction of the species.

When an individual is faced with a threat, the first instinct of importance is activated. This is the biological alarm response. The human being instinctively experiences biological arousal in preparation for decisive physical action. Whether or not that decisive physical action occurs is not important for our discussion. What is important is that an individual's internal physiological arousal level is “jacked up” under a variety of circumstances—as a human survival instinct. When an officer feels “antsy” anticipation when closing the distance to a suspect, experiences “butterflies” during a search of a darkened warehouse or alley, or has heightened senses prior to a high-risk entry, what is happening is that the body is instinctively preparing the individual to combat or adapt to some type of stressor.

What police officers have not understood as well is that while the individual's instinctive, preparatory biological response to a perceived threat is *generally* a process of arousal, survival instincts in individuals may also entail a type of physiological response that causes the slowing, inhibition, or complete stoppage of tactical thinking, aggressive behavior, or the amount of activity in muscles and organs of the body.¹⁷

When stress arousal becomes excessively intense or chronic (cumulative stress) in duration, some impairment will result. The human brain contains separate areas of activity. Each area is responsible for a task or specific group of tasks that enable the individual to respond effectively to threat. One part (the neocortex, or cerebral cortex) allows the individual to use information received by the senses. This part works to interpret the information available at the scene to determine what level of threat the individual is faced with. It then appraises the body's ability to withstand the threat and decides upon a response. (The cerebral cortex is concerned with communication, decision-making, problem-solving activities, planning, and the learning of skills.)

Any loss of concentration, assessment or analytical activity, or shutdown of conscious thinking in the officer prior to or during a tactical encounter due to the officer not being mentally prepared will disrupt or extinguish the ability to make rapid and accurate decisions. The loss of purposeful thinking during an encounter will impair the officer's ability to develop, alter, and/or implement a tactical plan based upon the principles and practices of tactics she or he has learned.

What an officer hopes and expects during a loss of concentration is that the actual circumstance he or she must now respond to goes along with the way the officer's perceptions, expectations, training, and personality predicted it would. When this "shutdown" in the cerebral cortex activity occurs, officers will react either from previously conditioned patterns of response developed during training activities, or by their own expectations and habits.

The **limbic system** serves an important role in our response to stress because of its role as the emotional control center for the human brain. The limbic system is comprised of numerous nerve structures that activate emotional responses when officers, for example, find themselves in a circumstance they were not mentally or tactically prepared for. Feelings of urgency, fear, helplessness, loss of control, anxiety, depression, and anger are generated in the structures of the limbic system.

The brain has one branch of the nervous system (sympathetic nervous system) that prepares our bodies for action. Its effect on the organs it activates is that of generalized arousal.¹⁸ Another branch the brain uses in its reactions to threat (the parasympathetic nervous system) is concerned with quieting the body and restoring it to resting levels. Its general effects are those of slowing and maintaining a type of *status quo* to enable the body to recover from demands placed upon it. While a parasympathetic reaction that lowers the level of the body's exertion assists an individual in "cooling down" from intense exercise, it greatly endangers that same individual during the course of a fierce struggle for survival.

When presented with a threat, the brain releases "stress" hormones, some of which increase and some that lessen arousal. A hormone called **cortisol** controls or modulates the body's arousal level. Cortisol is released when the brain is engaged in the appraisal of threat. Once the level of threat is appraised, the brain assesses the body's ability to respond to that threat.

When the brain perceives the danger to be moderate or severe, cortisol acts to turn stores of energy into glucose to fuel an individual's emergency response. Where there is no grave danger perceived by the organism, or after the brain perceives that the threat has ended, cortisol inhibits the stress response and returns the brain to normal functioning. When the brain appraises the threat as so extreme as to overwhelm the individual's ability to manage it, however, cortisol attempts to protect the survival of the body by lessening and/or shutting down the body's activity or energy.

Concerning police officers' physiology, parasympathetic nervous system shutdown most often occurs in two conditions. When officers don't expect to encounter much in the way of threat, there is a tendency to relax or let down their guard. When officers are unexpectedly or suddenly presented with extreme danger and they perceive no chance or ability to escape, the body's functioning and activity and arousal may be lessened, shut down, and extinguished. When something happens that interferes with or shuts down an officer's mental concentration and accurate appraisal of threat, the likelihood that the officer will use proper tactics is lessened—as are the chances of victory and survival.

Conversely, officers may place themselves in harm's way by reacting impulsively or heedlessly because they are more "jacked" than they are careful. When the call or contact requires a "3" level of arousal intensity to control it effectively, but the officer tends to operate on a "9" level on this type of contact, the officer may rush to try to make an arrest and be ambushed by deceptive suspect actions.

Psychological Reactions to Police Work

The type of mental activity that occurs during officers' assessment, prioritizing, and decision-making does not exist in a vacuum. It is affected by a number of different variables, especially how the individual officer reacts to stressful circumstances.

An officer's first task when arriving at the scene of a call for service, a traffic stop, or encounters with suspects in the field is to make an assessment of the scene. All subsequent plans for cover, concealment, dangers, and resources to be used, etc., are based upon these initial assessments. Whether or not the officer lives or dies will, in large measure, be determined by the timeliness, accuracy, and flexibility of the officer's analytic thinking—i.e., his or her ability to accurately register the level of threat the he or she faces and the possible need to shift the tactical plan he or she had initially intended to use.

The type of thinking required for such analysis, decision-making, problem-solving, and/or tactical planning is **sequential** in nature: first A, then B, then C, then D. Officers need to assess the makeup of the scene they are encountering and what type of situation they are dealing with. They examine how the subject or suspect is reacting to their presence, whether the subjects possess weapons, what levels of danger or threat they're encountering, their concerns, possible cover, backup, and tactical plans.

“Oh, It’s Going to Be One of These”

There is a logical reason why police officers begin to develop expectations about what they will encounter when they arrive at a scene. The mind of a police officer does not easily tolerate unknown circumstances without becoming tense. This is because unknown circumstances prevent the officer from using a previously developed tactical plan. He or she is, therefore, placed in a reactive mode and not psychologically prepared for what may be encountered. Police officers tend to be uncomfortable with feelings of uncertainty. Therefore, the officer’s mind often begins to create a scenario of the encounter, because such a scenario serves to reduce tension in the officer. In other words, officers begin to develop expectations about the nature of a contact before that contact is actually made.

Our expectations determine what we see. If police officers expect to encounter an unimportant false alarm at a silent alarm call (perhaps the last several silent alarms were false alarms), there is a tendency for the officer to consider the situation less threatening, because such a lessening in threat has been experienced in a number of prior alarm calls. The officer’s expectations that the call will not be problematic aids in temporarily decreasing uncomfortable feelings of uneasiness he or she may have. While I understand the officer may feel good at the time, I believe these expectations are extremely dangerous. Pre-existing expectations about a type of call that have been used by officers to reduce their tension have led to tragic underestimations of threats. Because of this, officers have found themselves in

circumstances they were not mentally, emotionally, or tactically prepared for.

The Trickery of Expectations

One officer I debriefed had been called to a day-care facility on two occasions to respond to a complaint. The estranged ex-boyfriend of the owner of the facility was alleged to have been lounging around the facility, staring at the owner with a fixed stare, and generally frightening her and other staff. The officer responded to the day-care facility and tried to contact the ex-boyfriend on two occasions. The subject reacted in a passive, meek, and withdrawing manner to the officer's presence.

In each contact with the subject, the officer felt an increasing confidence in his control of the situation. The subject did not demonstrate aggressiveness or offer any active resistance in either contact. Without his being consciously aware of it, the officer had begun to develop expectations of how the subject would react to him. These expectations developed from the good feeling of control the officer had experienced during two prior contacts with the same type of compliant, even "wimpy" subject.

There was now a third complaint made by the owner of the day-care facility regarding this subject. The same officer responded, but this time the subject—now a suspect—did not behave in the same manner he had in the two prior contacts. Standing in front of the day-care facility, the suspect's demeanor was, according to the officer, "pumped, tight, and rigid, like he could explode." The suspect began to verbally threaten the officer and advance toward him. The suspect's hand then disappeared into a jacket he was wearing—one that was different from the description previously broadcast by dispatch. He was screaming at the officer, "I'm going to kill you," and his behavior seemed highly consistent with his verbal threats.

The officer reacted with decisiveness and courage to the suspect's potentially lethal threats. The officer was married; he had loved ones he wanted to return to after his duty watch. The officer also had high moral values, and was greatly concerned after the incident (which

resulted in the use of lethal force) that he had done the correct and right thing. He felt bad, and the only reason he could think of for feeling bad was that he had done something wrong. He was therefore uneasy.

The officer had experienced a type of shock reaction during this very dangerous incident. Time appeared to slow down a great deal; he didn't hear sounds around him that were actually quite loud. Without realizing it, the officer had actually made a prediction of how the suspect would react to his presence on this third encounter. His brain had associated the two previous contacts he had had with the suspect and predicted a similar suspect behavior on this one. Without being consciously aware he was doing so, this highly professional officer had developed expectations that said to him: "Oh, it's going to be one of these."

The department's trauma support team—a team made up of police officers trained in the technique of psychological debriefing—performed an initial debriefing with the officer immediately after the investigating detectives had taped an interview with him. The officer was later referred to me for a second debriefing.

During the course of this debriefing, I told the officer some relatively simple reasons why he was not feeling better after this incident. I indicated that when an officer has prior contact with some circumstance or person, he or she will naturally have a tendency to begin to use the experience on this prior contact as a "base" for what he or she will "need to do" during future encounters and how the encounters will "go" as well.

The officer came to understand that he was feeling uneasy because he had predicted what the suspect would do instead of analyzing what the suspect was doing at the present time. The officer was actually remembering past behaviors observed earlier as he was engaging with the suspect the third time. Therefore, he was shocked and surprised when things did not go the way he had expected. I suggested to him that he was logically upset because he'd been taken

by surprise and had, as a result, felt momentary feelings of a loss of control; he certainly had not done “wrong” in this incident.

When an officer’s brain has predicted a single, minimal degree of threat but encounters another, serious threat instead, some disruption in perception can be expected to occur. This is actually a logical physiological response to unanticipated emergency circumstances. It is not a “sign” that the officer is not in complete control of him- or herself.

Certainly the officer in the above example could have beaten himself up for not **reading the scene** properly. Because he held such high moral and professional standards for himself, the officer had mistakenly interpreted his post-incident feelings of discomfort as indicating that he had “done something wrong” and he felt badly about it. According to the investigating detectives from the county’s officer team, the officer had conducted himself properly and courageously.

Indeed, several eyewitnesses each had reported the exact same actions by the suspect and the officer. Witnesses reported that the officer had, several times in a loud and clear voice, ordered the suspect to stop. “Drop your weapon,” he had said. “This can be ended without anyone being hurt.” As if he were entreating the suspect, he had continued: “Don’t make me do this.” However, the eyewitnesses reported that the suspect did not comply with the officer’s commands and advanced and assaulted the officer in a manner that had frightened them and represented a threat to lives.

I provided the officer with an understanding of the causes for his perfectly logical reactions to the threat he had encountered: “When the suspect refused to allow you to save him, and at the last possible moment,” I told him, “you acted in a decisive and courageous manner. You saved the woman and children that this guy was going to harm. I can understand you’re not feeling thrilled, because you were surprised.” The officer came to realize and accept that he had been made victim of a coward’s way out of his difficulties: “Suicide by Cop.”

It has long been acknowledged in the fields of law enforcement and psychology that sensory distortions occur to police officers during certain high-risk encounters. Lapses in officer concentration during an encounter with lethal threat, the appearance of a slowing of motion, muffled sounds and recoil, detail errors during post-incident reporting, and, in many cases, a lack of conscious awareness by the officer that he or she was using serious or lethal force have been reported by a majority of police officers during post-incident psychological debriefings I have performed. It has been my experience that these sensory changes are more likely to occur on patrol, because almost all patrol encounters contain some degree of unanticipated encounter. When they have encountered unanticipated events, officers have reacted based upon their training, their previous practice, and what they had experienced successfully in prior encounters. Sometimes their responses worked and sometimes they did not.

I strongly believe that sensory distortions that officers have reported experiencing during lethal encounters occur in direct reaction to **unanticipated elements** contained within the scene. In my clinical work with officers, I have observed a consistently occurring, predictable “thread” running through a great many of their reactions.

If the officer has not been surprised by the elements that he or she encounters (through the use of information provided to the officers for an incident in which the elements were known, or through their use of analysis rather than expectation), his or her reactions to the threat are not likely to contain any type of shock or distorted perception. If, however, officers encounter unanticipated elements—i.e., expecting one thing but encountering another—they have a much greater likelihood of some disturbance in their perceptions of the event, and some post-incident stress because of a shock reaction they go through.

Sgt. Ed Deuel and I decided to conduct an experiment in training methods with the Huntington Beach, California Police Department Training Division, 1997–1999. We believed that if officers were

presented with ambush or surprise circumstances during in-service training simulations, using experienced officers over a period of time—and with repetitions of the scenario performed until such time that the officer consistently prevailed over the adversary—then it would be less likely that he or she would be shocked, experience any sensory distortions, or hesitate (or freeze) in responding to the threat. We believed this to be true because the officer’s brain would now be conditioned to respond effectively to unanticipated circumstances and thus the officer would be more likely to control and overcome the threat.

Sgt. Deuel himself told me of his own surprise when he unexpectedly came upon an armed robbery in progress while on duty as a “brand-new sergeant.” On that night, his thoughts and expectations were not on tactical readiness; he took for granted that his work was tactically excellent. However, Deuel’s skill as an officer—and his body armor, which took two bullets from a Tec-9 in his chest—saved him by allowing him to take immediate, decisive action and extinguish the threat. He was, however, surprised when, in a video re-enactment of his shooting,¹⁹ the actor playing the suspect turned toward him. “Wait a second,” said Deuel, “you’re supposed to be moving extremely slowly...the suspect moved and turned in an extreme slow motion...” This was not true. It just appeared to Deuel that way. During the surprise encounter, Deuel also heard no sounds during the battle.

As discussed, range training, while greatly beneficial to police officers in allowing them to master the use of their equipment, cannot be expected to prepare officers completely for actual encounters with lethal threat in the field—threats that most often involve multiple suspects moving around and possible officers and/or citizens in the line of danger. How valuable the training of police officers is specifically for unanticipated circumstances in their encounters was shown clearly in an incident in the same police department.

Throughout their careers, officers respond to many interrupted or hang-up “911” calls. Time after time, officers find a relatively

simple explanation for the call and the hang-up. Without being aware of it, officers can easily develop a laid-back attitude when a “911 hang-up” is broadcast. It’s not surprising to hear the first officer on the scene cancel a backup and communicate “Code 4” or “Everything is hunky-dory” prior to a careful search of the premises. Indeed, officers who call for backup too often get a reputation as wimps who can’t patrol their beat on their own.

Heroic Acts

One day, however, a police officer on Day Watch answered a call from a beauty salon. Three women customers were in the salon and one of them had her small child in tow. A dangerous felon had entered the salon and demanded both flesh and money from the adult women and child. He locked the women and the child in a small storage room and made it clear he was going to rape them.

One of the employees of the salon quietly picked up the telephone so the suspect would not know a “911” call was being made. The employee dialed the emergency number and then put down the phone without speaking into it, since any conversation would have alerted the suspect.

The police officer who took the call was a senior officer in the department, a veteran of over twenty years of police work. He was the officer whom the new officers in the department looked up to and wanted to emulate. He responded to the address provided him in the broadcast of a “911 hang-up,” never really expecting to face imminent death and a fight for his life. After all, in numerous other occasions there had been some relatively simple explanation for the call and the hang-up.

From the salon, the suspect observed the officer’s approach and could have escaped through a rear door located next to the storage room and never been seen again. However, the suspect decided to remain in the store, kill the cop, and then go back for the women. Posing as an employee by putting on a hair-cutter’s apron, the suspect

walked out and greeted the officer, carrying a bag that contained a gun. Without warning, at a distance of from six to ten feet, he opened fire at the officer.

Although the officer simultaneously received three bullets to his left arm and two bullets to the upper torso (which were stopped by his second chance vest), he managed to unsnap his weapon, draw it, and take a position face-to-face with the suspect. The officer returned fire, striking the suspect ten times. The suspect went down. It was only when he couldn't operate his hand-set radio that the officer realized he couldn't move his left arm. He realized he was bleeding heavily and retreated to the front door area where he asked citizens to help him. He used his portable radio to call for help.

The officer later stated that this incident occurred exactly like the training scenarios he had recently been exposed to. He'd been unexpectedly ambushed in one of the training scenarios and had been successful in his ability to draw and return fire in a life-and-death situation where the suspect was less than ten feet away and the officer's weapon had been holstered and snapped.

There was no decision-making performed in this incident. When the officer was faced with this grave threat, he acted with a spontaneous, aggressive, life-saving, and successful sequence of actions. The officer had practiced this behavior enough that a habit had developed in his brain. Therefore, when he was ambushed, he reacted in a decisive and successful manner. The officer was not slowed by any shock or indecision; he didn't hesitate or freeze. He didn't need to take the time to make decisions about what to do. He was prepared and ready to do it.

A few days later, as the officer was lying in his hospital bed with his wounded, broken arm and bruised chest, the husband of one of the women in the salon came to visit him with his wife and child. Sobbing, he thanked this heroic officer for saving his family.

Development of Habit

The brain will not do what an officer hopes or expects it to do. It will do as it has practiced. Repeated patterns or sequences of behavior that an officer performs will change the pathways through which neural activity occurs in the brain. When an officer suddenly encounters a grave, unanticipated, and immediate threat, it is unlikely that he or she will have the luxury of time to make decisions about what to do. His or her brain will follow previously conditioned mental and behavioral patterns.

Either through repeated experiences or one severe or intense experience, the structure and direction of nerves in the brain can change. If, for example, officers have succeeded in calming and defusing several potentially escalating encounters by talking to the subjects in a respectful and reasonable manner, then, over the course of time and repetitions of these successful verbal contacts, they are likely to become habituated or conditioned to using these tools. Then, when they encounter grave, unanticipated, and immediate threats, they may be predisposed to continue to "...try to talk and give verbal direction to a suspect who was trying to murder them."²⁰

Such habit behaviors are automatically (unconsciously) performed. It's not that the officer is thinking about doing it; it is that he or she is *very likely to do it* whenever the source of the habit (such as the successful use of verbal tactics above) is encountered. Put in other terms, unless you concentrate upon assessing *this here-and-now scene* with *this subject* under *these conditions*, you are likely to do what is familiar to you when you are in unfamiliar territory. These unconsciously performed patterns by police officers are sometimes, in the aftermath of an officer's injury or death, referred to in a critical manner as **complacency**.

There is a plaque in the sergeant's office in the Orange County, California Sheriff's Academy. It lists "20 Fatal Mistakes" made by police officers.²¹ Many of these mistakes involve some type of compromise or lapse in officers' mental activity, the accuracy of their perceptions, or how they exercised judgment. It may be tiredness,

relaxing too soon, overconfidence, false bravado, lack of self-control, or discipline.

Is it just fatigue that makes officers complacent? Is it a question of underestimating the current threat and relaxing too soon simply because the officer has now spent several moments with a suspect (a person normally becomes more relaxed with another with the passing of time)? Is it overconfidence in a particular type of approach or tactic that restricts what resources the officer can use against the threat? Is it “tombstone courage” that causes an officer to rush to contact with a suspect in order to make something happen? Or is it a lack of self-control of the body’s arousal level and/or lack of self-discipline in the choices of action the officer takes? Whatever the specific cause, it is highly likely that what occurred to the officer in his or her tragic error in tactics was a result of uncontrolled and unconscious use of habits that have “worked” for the officer in the past.

Because threats come at officers in many, many ways—most of which cannot be predicted prior to the immediate contact with the threat—a primary task communicated by several expert law enforcement trainers and tactical instructors is to combat complacency in police officers. Within the general term “complacency” one can observe a number of possible errors made by officers during tactical encounters.²²

It doesn’t matter whether an officer is the most experienced tactical instructor or expert on the department. When an officer’s thinking is preoccupied or distracted by frustrations, irritability, emotional distress or depression, worry, or anticipation of some event, the part of his or her brain that creates emotion starts firing. When that happens, the part of the brain that registers threat and the need to shift tactics—the cerebral cortex—loses two-thirds of its spark, fuel, and activity.

If officers approaching a subject are concerned about making the individual happy about police contact, the officers’ brains may underestimate or ignore signals that tell them they are placing

themselves in a position of disadvantage or danger. As one supervising tactical instructor advised:

You can be polite...the subject has to be aware that the officer they face is in command...you do that with command presence. What was going through the officer's mind...am I going to be held liable? You deal with the parolee and you deal with the victim. You can smoothe someone's feathers later...the parolee will read a polite officer as, "he's doable...."²³

Another supervising tactical instructor suggests that officers need to be trained to avoid getting "sucked in by the situation." A domestic dispute, an "assist the person" call with a mentally disturbed individual, an "unknown trouble" call where the description of the scene is minimal or conflictual, a woman screaming that she needs help—all these have the potential to cause officers to lose their **presence of mind** as they engage the encounter.²⁴

Presence of Mind

Presence of mind refers to a critically important act of concentrating upon a task, a conscious analysis of imminent threat, and a conscious choice of tactic and force options—all in the presence of an emergency. Tactical instructors often refer to presence of mind in the face of an emergency as "decision-making under pressure."

Presence of mind also refers to an honest self-evaluation: "To thine own self be true." Officers need to ask themselves whether they tend to rush in a little bit or need to engage banteringly with people. An officer who is prepared, ready, and able is one who will think about the what-if's, but not lock on to preconceived notions. Uncontrolled emotional activity and/or uncontrolled habit tendencies disrupt the type of thinking required for presence of mind.

Every police officer worth his or her salt has encountered an incident significant or profound enough to maintain its impact upon

how the officer felt, acted, or performed his or her work, even after the call was cleared. Then, when some subsequent encounter contains similar elements to the one that so impacted the officer, the officer may experience the very same reactions and act as if the very same reactions were what were called for in the current incident.

In the aftermath of traumatic incident encounters, many officers have found that they changed the way they worked. In one national sample of police officers participating in research on stress in police work,²⁵ sixty percent reported that the immediate and long-term impact of disturbing incidents had changed the way they worked. Some reported engaging in more officer-initiated activity, others less. Others reported greater or less fear experienced in subsequent contact.

Regardless of the manner in which post-incident reactions have impacted an officer, however, the officer's ability to maintain effective presence of mind and situation-appropriate action is likely to be impaired. The lasting impact of a past event can influence or alter an officer's current response to a threat.

Police officers today are often more concerned with what others or society might say about their work than before. I have debriefed and evaluated hundreds of officers' uses of force in the last twenty years, yet I have found in the past eight years (since the 1992 incident involving Rodney King), and with increasingly greater frequency of occurrence, that even though the officers' use of force later turned out to be justified, they had allowed the suspect the ability to threaten them to a point where greater levels of force were required. Officers seem hesitant to contain and command a situation assertively and aggressively for fear of being criticized, punished, or sued. More and more media attention has been placed upon both civil and criminal legal action taken against officers in the course of their work.

Inadequate physical and mental conditioning has resulted in the deaths of police officers. Officers' safety depends upon their effective use of decision-making and rapid, decisive response to threats. And yet, a major impediment to officers' ability to maintain effective decision-making or presence of mind during emergency lies in their

extreme reluctance to appear as if they have “messed up.” Because officers are constantly second-guessed for their actions and decisions in every encounter in which they engage, over time a defensive, self-protective mask is formed that covers over officers’ potentially fatal insecurities, self-doubts, or errors in judgment.

No one is suggesting that police officers become mean, grumpy, or treat everyone like a criminal. However, another of my “rules of life” is pertinent here: You never know what precaution saved you, so it is stupid not to use each and every one of them, no matter what you do. You never know what mistake killed you, so make sure you never make the same one twice.

Like many of us, I hate making mistakes. What I do is embrace them, instead. I don’t ignore them. I don’t ever want them to occur again. Officer safety would be well served with some alteration in the standard method law enforcement employs in stressful circumstances: “If no one saw it, and I don’t think about it, it doesn’t bother me. If it doesn’t bother me, I have no problem with it. If I have no problem with it, I’m *okfine*.”

Isn’t this approach to stress in some way a surrender? We need to develop a habit of overcoming adversity and countermanding any and all threat to a successful outcome by confronting and managing the situation, not cloaking or “stuffing away” the areas in which we are less strong.

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1. Personal communications, 1999.
 2. Wemmer, 1999.
 3. Wemmer, Osuna, Deuel, Miller, Bardzik, 1999. Heal 2000.
 4. Wemmer, 1999.
 5. LEOKA Study, California Commission on Police Officer Standards and Training, 1996.
 6. *Ibid.*, pp. 1–17.
 7. Federal Bureau of Investigation, U.S. Department of Justice, *Killed in the Line of Duty: A Study of Selected Felonious Killings of Law Enforcement Officers*, 1992. p. 32
 8. See, for example, Cannon-Bowers & Salas, 1998; Kozlowski, 1998.
 9. Kozlowski, 1998.
 10. Cannon-Bowers & Salas, 1998.
 11. *Ibid.*

12. Blum, 1994.
13. Cannon-Bowers & Salas, 1998.
14. Everly, 1986; *et al.*
15. Blum, 1994; 1998.
16. The reader interested in the study of tactics will find much material to study. An excellent and easy-to-read example is Heal, 2000.
17. Engel, 1971; Gellhorn, 1968; Selye, 1981; Gray, 1985; *et al.*
18. Everly, 1989.
19. Wemmer, 1986.
20. California Law Enforcement Officers Killed and Assaulted in the Line of Duty, 1990–1994 Report, 1996, pp. 1–48. In beat patrol, for example, an officer will likely develop his or her own “style” of working his or her area of responsibility. Officers develop routines and usually predictable patterns. They develop habits. (See Bardzik, personal communications, 1999.)
21. Bardzik, 1999.
22. It is not solely on-duty habit patterns that can create complacency or error in an officer’s response to threat. It can happen if an officer is preoccupied by circumstances in his or her personal life, in actions of the police organization, in actions of city councils or town government that troubles him or her in the ability to engage in the analytic thinking that is required for proper tactics.
23. Bardzik, 1999.
24. Miller, 1999.
25. Blum, 1998.