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Firearms



"An officer of the New York City, New York, Police Department, with three years of law enforcement experience, was fatally wounded subsequent to making a traffic stop. After observing a vehicle containing two males driving eastbound in a westbound traffic lane, the victim officer and his partner stopped the car and proceeded to search the subjects. Suddenly an individual arrived at the scene claiming that the apprehended men had just robbed his luncheonette. As the victim's partner began handcuffing one of the alleged robbers, a struggle ensued between the two, and the other suspect fled. The remaining subject, aged 36, managed to obtain the partner's .38 caliber handgun and fired three times, striking the 34-year-old victim officer in the back." <sup>1</sup> The officer died, slain with the weapon of a police officer. Unusual? A rare occurrence? Un-

## Gun Retention

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fortunately it is not. Nine officers, nearly 10 percent of the total number (93), were killed in 1977 with their own weapons. Moreover, FBI Uniform Crime Reports' statistics indicate that between 1970 and 1975 the number of officers slain with their own weapons increased 111 percent.

The ever-present potential for such tragedies seems to have escaped the attention of most training administrators and training specialists. There is a scarcity of literature pertaining to preventing being disarmed although techniques of varying degrees of effectiveness abound for disarming the subject who is pointing a weapon at the officer. (Editor's Note: See "Officer Disarmings—A Response," *FBI Law Enforcement Bulletin*, vol. 47, no. 3,

March 1978, p. 8.) Unfortunately, these techniques require a substantial amount of skill and constant reinforcement, and most police officers have neither the time nor the inclination to devote to becoming proficient in combative arts.

We will, therefore, consider the threat of an officer being shot with his own weapon primarily from a preventive standpoint, i.e., that "an ounce of prevention is worth a pound of technique." Hopefully, an officer with a proper mental attitude will consider personal and environmental factors, and will rarely, if ever, be placed in the position of having to resort to physical arts in a life-and-death struggle.

Among preventive measures, we first consider one which is simple to learn although it demands practice and concentration. It is a state of mind in which an officer is constantly aware of his surroundings and any individual he is contacting, as well as any other person(s) nearby. He surrounds himself with an aura of caution. There is a thin line here that must be tread between the jumpy, twitchy gunfighter and the tunnel-visioned individual who is oblivious to everything around him.

Three hundred and sixty degree vision is a necessity. An officer, through relaxation and concentration techniques, can bring himself to a level of mental acuity where he is conscious of everybody and everything around him. This significantly reduces the chances of a sudden surprise attack by an unobserved associate of the suspect, a situation which has arisen frequently in officer deaths involving their own weapons.

This state of mind has the benefits again of reducing or eliminating "peep-hole" concentration where the officer focuses on only one thing (such as filling out a summons) plus the substantial spinoff benefit of forcing an officer to relax. He will only be truly effective in his 360° set when he is relaxed. Tension, stress, and anger only serve to slow him down and make him awkward and stiff. As a matter of fact, such relaxation and concentration techniques are not difficult to learn and their practice can have far-reaching beneficial returns in terms of overall stress reduction.<sup>2</sup>



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The next step on the prevention ladder is the combination of the "posture of the mind" and "posture of the body." Here the officer must be keenly aware that in every call to which he responds, in every field contact he makes, there is at least one man present who has a gun—himself. A strong, on-balance posture is required from which an officer can quickly and efficiently move away from an aggressor and simultaneously keep his holstered weapon beyond the reach of the suspect during conversation with him or her. This is best accomplished by an officer standing just beyond arms' reach of an individual with his body turned so that the weapon is "away" from the subject.

It is alarming to note in casual observation the number of officers who unwittingly place themselves in a position to be disarmed. Most officers allow themselves to be disarmed by standing or sitting in such a position that their holstered weapon, often improperly snapped or unsnapped, presents a most inviting object to an individual who is amenable to the thought of assaulting an officer.

It should be noted that within the sphere of this "aura of caution" which includes 360° vision and proper posture is the consideration that overfamiliarity with the subject has been a factor in police deaths. Because an officer knows the person and has dealt with him before, he lowers his mental and physical defenses. Note well the fact that in 1977, 32 percent of the 93 officers killed knew their assailant.<sup>3</sup> This reinforces the need for ever-present vigilance and scrutiny.

The next dose of preventive medicine is one which will overlap into the technique area. It has to do with physical conditioning. Studies indicate that considering the rigors and demands of the job, police officers, in general, are in poor condition.<sup>4</sup> This has to add to the attractiveness of an officer as a target when he is facing a subject who is evaluating the probable success of an attack on the lawman. The studies conclude that the average officer can barely hold his own from a conditioning standpoint with the average citizen and is in worse condition than the average prison inmate. An overweight, obviously out-of-shape officer does not present the same deterrent as one who is trim, fit, and exudes an image of good health and strength. A corollary of this fitness element comes to mind when prevention is of



*Proper stance and positioning of the weapon is essential to effective gun retention.*



*An auxiliary weapon, concealed and readily accessible, should be carried in the event the primary weapon is compromised.*

no avail and an officer must fight to retain his weapon. Cardiovascular endurance and strength may now make the critical difference between success and failure, between life and death.

The overall benefits of physical conditioning in improving the longevity and efficiency of police personnel are now a subject of increasing interest to research and development personnel. Perhaps insights will be gained that will lead to the establishment of meaningful, worthwhile programs of fitness that both administrator and "foot soldier" will be able to make a commitment to.

Still pursuing the link between prevention and technique, let us consider accouterment. First on the list is the police holster. Often discussions of equipment turn into heated debates with as many individual opinions as to the effectiveness of specific items as there are individuals. Therefore, we will deal in generalities. In a holster an officer must look for both safety and his own quick access to the weapon. Most experts agree that the "high-ride" holster meets both these criteria. It provides quick access to the gun, yet due to the holster's high position on the belt, where the gun can be readily protected by the officer clamping his arm against it, the assailant is not able to reach it easily. Some styles of these

holsters are designed in such a manner that the weapon will not come out when grabbed from behind as by a member of a crowd. An officer cannot, however, place too much reliance on a holster to the exclusion of other precautions, as is evidenced by the fact that lawmen have had their guns snatched from just about every make and style of holster made.

Another equipment topic that generates considerable controversy when particularities are discussed is the protective vest. While some departments mandate the wearing of the vest, most allow it to be an optional item for the officer. There is no doubt that it is a cost-effective "insurance policy" that no patrol officer can afford to be without. Again referring to statistics, in 1977, 45 of the 83 officers slain with firearms (over 50 percent) were shot in the torso. Eighty-one percent of the overall total were in uniform. One criterion the officer should bear in mind when selecting a vest is that it be capable of stopping the caliber of bullet he carries in his service revolver should the worst happen and he be disarmed. Additionally, the vest has extra benefits as a protective device in

auto accidents, knife attacks, and assaults with personal weapons (feet and hands).

A second "insurance policy" in the equipment category is the auxiliary weapon. The purpose of this weapon is to serve as a backup in situations where there is a failure of the service revolver or where the primary weapon is close to falling or has fallen into the hands of the assailant. For maximum effectiveness this secondary weapon must be concealed, yet readily accessible. Such equipment as ankle holsters and boot guns fail to meet the standard of ready accessibility, while a second revolver or automatic stuck in the belt is as accessible to the suspect as it is to the officer. Some variation of a small snubnosed revolver, especially the shroud model, carried in the front or back pocket of the uniform trousers meets both the accessibility and concealment criteria. Of course, there are administrators with different attitudes, e.g., one may issue or authorize an auxiliary weapon and another may prohibit the carrying of a second weapon, fearing that it will be used as a "throw-down" weapon.

We have now explored the preventive measures. Hopefully, through learning and use of these attitudes and implements, an officer will avoid being put in the position of having to fight a



An officer must disengage from the suspect at all costs.



subject who is trying to unholster the officer's weapon. But, what if the worst happens and suddenly and unavoidably the officer finds himself the object of an attack in which the assailant's goal is to obtain the officer's gun? It is here that presence of mind and physical conditioning will begin to pay dividends.

It is in the physical arena that there is misdirection in training. Officers are often given sophisticated hand-to-hand combat training which, if given enough instruction and practice in the classroom environment, they become very adept at. Unfortunately, much of this training is futile because it is not reinforced by regular review and practice once the officer is on the street. Moreover, the officer often gains a false sense of confidence from his initial training and then finds himself overwhelmed in the actual situation. Physical training in gun retention should stress the most basic techniques, which can be recalled in a combat situation with a minimum of effort. In a struggle for control of his weapon, the officer has so many stimuli affecting his mind that he will never be able to recall and activate anything but the most basic movements. These

basic techniques, which include disabling blows to the eyes, the throat, and the groin, are designed to disable temporarily or permanently the attacker depending on the gravity of the situation. In addition, because of their simplicity, these techniques are easily learned and easily recalled in a stressful situation. The only consideration the officer has to make before using these techniques is a proper assessment of the situation to determine how much force is justified. Most of the time, though, the situation is evolving into one of life and death, since the officer must assume that if the subject obtains the weapon the officer will most assuredly find himself in a grievous position.

The above techniques are designed to help the officer in attaining the second principle, a rule which must be scrupulously adhered to and that is to DISENGAGE. An officer, regardless of his strength and training, must always assume that his assailant is stronger and tougher than he is. This is frequently true, in fact, because of the influence of drugs and/or alcohol on the subject. A number of powerful and physically talented officers have been overwhelmed, disarmed, and summarily executed because they chose to engage in a wrestling match with their killer. An officer must at all costs *dise-*

*gare* and then use the appropriate amount of force to thwart the attack. This force can take the form of his mace, baton, service revolver, or auxiliary weapon if his primary weapon has been neutralized. Half-hearted attempts to subdue an individual who is deranged enough to attack physically an armed police officer can only result in undesirable consequences befalling that officer.

In considering responses to the specific problem of a subject attempting to wrest an officer's gun from his holster, just as in the overall crime picture, prevention is of primary importance. When prevention fails, specific techniques are in order. Experience has demonstrated that the more basic these techniques, the more effective they are. Practice concentration, relaxation, physical conditioning. Use the proper equipment and pray that specific disengagement and subduing techniques will not be necessary. **FBI**

#### Footnotes

<sup>1</sup> FBI Uniform Crime Reports, *Law Enforcement Officers Killed in 1977*, U.S. Department of Justice.

<sup>2</sup> Robert K. Koga, *Koga Method: Police Weaponless Control and Defense Techniques* (Beverly Hills, Calif.: Glencoe Press, 1969).

<sup>3</sup> FBI Uniform Crime Reports, *Law Enforcement Officers Killed in 1977*, U.S. Department of Justice.

<sup>4</sup> National Institute of Law Enforcement and Criminal Justice, *Physical Fitness Programs for Law Enforcement Officers: A Manual for Police Administrators*, LEAA.



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