

Police Use of Force Training

A Personal/Professional Point Of View

I am writing this letter in response to an article entitled "Shooting spurs calls for more training" (Times Colonist, Thursday July 15 2004). The reader should know that I am a serving Law Enforcement professional who also runs a self protection company that specializes in safety awareness and self defence training for men, women, children, businesses, and corporations. I am also a court recognized police/civilian Use of Force expert in both the Provincial and Supreme Courts of British Columbia, and I have also provided expert testimony in two Coroners inquests specific to police use of force training here in our Province. I am not going to comment on the events leading up to the shooting of Mr. Camaso due to the fact that this unfortunate incident is still being investigated, but I wish to make comment on some of the training issues/questions asked in the July 15th Times Colonist article.

The goal of every police officer, when dealing with violence, is to solve conflict via communication and dialogue. In fact, most of the officer subject contacts made in our province, where non-compliance is encountered, are brought to a successful resolution through communication and dialogue resulting in voluntary co-operation from the subject(s) being dealt with. The reality is however, that there are times when communication and dialogue will fail, or will be inappropriate or unreasonable given the situation faced at the time.

In the Province of British Columbia, municipal police officers have a variety of Force Options available to them that include; Force Presence (just being in uniform), Communication and Dialogue, Empty Hand Compliance Techniques (pressure points, arm bars, lateral neck restraint), Less Lethal Weapons (pepper spray, Taser, bean bag shot guns, Arwen guns), empty hand impact techniques (punches, kicks), batons, and firearms.

Rarely in our job, especially here in the Greater Victoria area, do police officers have to resort to the use of deadly force to protect themselves or others from death or grievous bodily injury. No one, including a police officer, want to take the life of another, but sometimes there is no other "reasonable" option available to protect others or ourselves. Until someone can invent the Star Trek phaser that can be set on "stun" that will work one hundred percent of the time, we are left with a weapon (firearm) that was invented hundreds of years ago. Yes we have less lethal technology such as Taser, Bean bags, Arwen guns, pepper spray, and batons, but all of these weapons have limitations and failure rates between 10-20%. If you found yourself in a dynamic and constantly evolving deadly force encounter that was a clear and present threat with little if any time to react, and you had a choice of a weapon that may fail 20% of the time, compared with a weapon that fails less than 2% of the time, which would you pick. Although a firearm is not guaranteed to stop a threat 100% of the time, it is the only technology available to date that gets us as close to this goal if required to protect our life. Some ask, "Why don't you just shoot the gun, knife, or club from their hand(s)?" The reality is, to hit such a small moving target, under dynamic and constantly changing conditions, would be lucky at the very best, so officers are taught to shoot to the largest target possible, center mass of the human torso. Unfortunately, due to the physical makeup of the human anatomy, when bullets strike this area, death is a likely outcome, but this is never our intent. When police officers shoot they do not shoot to kill, but rather they shoot to stop the deadly force threat. Is death likely to occur?, yes, but there is a difference under the Criminal Code of Canada between murder and justifiable homicide in a self defence situation.

In most shootings, it is not uncommon for the police officer to shoot multiple rounds at the threat. Even if a single bullet hits the body, unless it hits a Central Nervous system target (brain, spinal cord), the threat can and will continue their attack. In fact, studies conducted by Dr. Alexis Artwohl found that even if the heart is hit with a shot gun round, a subject still has between 30-40 seconds of oxygenated blood left in their body to still physically function; attack, shoot, hit, or stab the officer or another person. Thus the reason for multiple fired rounds until the deadly force threat is stopped.

After all police shootings, there will rightly be heavy scrutiny by many including; the officer's department, outside law enforcement agencies, the courts (both criminal and civil), the coroner, the media, and by the general public. Many will question the officer's actions, including the officer himself or herself, and some will always disagree with the taking of a life. When combined with the psychological trauma and family impact on the officer involved, why would anyone think that a police officer would want to use deadly force unless in the most dangerous of situations where no other "reasonable" option exists?

My last words surround comments made by Sgt Rick Parent (PhD) who stated that police are having to deal with more and more subjects who are experiencing social, medical, and mental health issues. No truer statement could be made !!!! This is one reason why all municipal police departments here in the Greater Victoria area, work closely with a team of medical professionals known as the Victoria Emergency Mental Health Team. This team is constantly called upon by law enforcement to help fill the gap between "traditional" and "non-traditional" roles when dealing with clients with mental health challenges in conflict with the law. It is also not uncommon for the Emergency Mental Health Team to request our services as well when assessing their clients. This very successful symbiotic relationship has been in place for many years, and has no doubt benefited many clients who have come into contact with law enforcement due to their mental health challenges. One has to remember however, that police do not have a crystal ball when answering calls for service/help. Often, there is no previous history available to police on an address being attended, or the subject of a complaint and as such, we can only deal with what we are confronted with upon our arrival. Many who suffer from mental health challenges do not present their condition outwardly and as because of this fact, how can one expect police officers to make an assessment of mental health issues in a dynamic deadly force situation that is changing second by second.

Most of our laws, religions, and morals have as a premise that life is precious. The taking of a life by a police officer is never an easy decision no matter what the incident. I have personally drawn my firearm many times, but have never needed to fire. Having said this, if in the future I am faced with a deadly force threat and other force options available had failed or were unreasonable given the situation; I will not hesitate to use deadly force to protect my life, or the life of others, from death or grievous bodily injury.

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