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Force Science[®] News #276

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Can you really use your sights in a gunfight? Should you if you can?

Training reminder: A Force Science Certification Course has been added to the schedule. A course will be conducted May 11-15 at the Department of Homeland Security's Training Center in Alexandria, VA. Registrations are now being taken.

For details on this and other FS Certification Courses visit: www.forcescience.org/schedule.html

Thanks.

--Scott Buhrmaster, Vice President of Operations, Force Science Institute

In this edition:

- I. Can you really use your sights in a gunfight? Should you if you can?
- II. Training revolution needed to prepare cops for gunfights: Lewinski
- III. Documentary filmmaker probes force realities at new Force Science Training Center

I. Can you really use your sights in a gunfight? Should you if you can?

A reader recently sent us this inquiry:

It is said that stress hampers eye focus, making it impossible to use your sights in a life-threatening encounter. Yet some people who have been involved in real firearms engagements state they used their sights. Can you aim and use sights under stress if you have the proper training?

Capt. Jorge Tierno Rey

Dir., Dept. of Security & Protection
Spanish Marine Corps School
Cartagena, Murcia State, Spain

Dr. Bill Lewinski, executive director of the Force Science Institute, responds:

In a panic situation, where an officer is caught in a threat by surprise and perhaps overwhelmed by emotion, he or she may not be able to respond with sufficient control to attain a sight picture in the fraction of time available. There are changes to the eye under stress that can make sighting more difficult, but with the right training these can be overcome. Our research with equipment that tracks eye movement shows that sighted fire can be accomplished even under intense stress.

The key is a combination of two critical elements: 1) your innate ability to acquire and implement the technical skills of effective weapon management, and 2) the type and quality of instruction that constitute the "right" training for gunfight mastery.

In the US, many departments train their officers only to the level of minimum state standards, which are inadequate for achieving high-level proficiency. The bulk of their training often is presented in concentrated blocks, after which learned psychomotor skills rapidly deteriorate, rather than through continual reinforcement at intervals, which tends to build and maintain skills over time. And, deplorably, many officers are never exposed to firearms training of any kind that allows them to practice perception, decision-making, and responses at the speed of an actual gunfight.

All this leaves them dangerously deficient in many aspects of quality performance in a crisis, sight-acquisition among them.

It's important to understand that using your sights in a gunfight is not always necessary or even desirable for effectively placing rounds. If you don't get a sight picture at 20 ft. and beyond, your ability to shoot accurately is likely to be seriously impaired. That's actually not very far, in real world settings--down a hallway or across some rooms.

Closer than that, at distances where most gunfights occur, trying to use your sights may take too long; by the time you're sighted in, your target may have moved. At less than 20 ft., you're probably best to fix your gaze on your

target and quickly drive your gun up to align with that line of view, firing unsighted.

Obviously, to do this successfully requires a great deal of consistent practice, responding to force-on-force scenarios at various distances that develop realistically in terms of action, movement, and speed. This will help you learn to identify the telltale patterns of an evolving threat so you can get ahead of the reactionary curve.

Over time, you will learn how threats unfold and be able to anticipate what, where, when, and how the "play" will progress. This, in turn, will build in you the ability to react automatically--without conscious thought--either with or without the use of your sights, depending on the dynamic circumstances you face. You will, in effect, be better equipped to stay ahead of the reactionary curve.

To achieve that level of skill, be prepared to go, on your own, beyond the training offered by your agency. It is the rare department indeed that has the budget and the time to take officers as far as their native ability allows and elevate them to truly elite status.

Even at no cost, you can still strengthen your fundamental skills, including sight acquisition, through dry-fire drills. With modern weapons, you can dry fire literally thousands of times without damage to your equipment.

When your life is on the line, your personal commitment to be the best you can be will seem a small price to have paid.

II. Training revolution needed to prepare cops for gunfights

The continuing need for a revolution in law officer training in the United States was driven home in a keynote speech by Dr. Bill Lewinski to an assembly of the northern division of the Illinois chapter of the FBI National Academy Associates in Chicago recently.

In explaining to the crowd of 220 Academy alums why he and his associates founded the Force Science Institute a decade ago, Lewinski said: "We saw too many officers paying a price for inadequate training that was too dear. It's our time in the trenches to do what we can to make a difference."

The challenges, he emphasized, are sobering indeed. For example, he said, it would take an officer who receives a typical amount of academy and in-service training in psychomotor skills, including firearms, more than 30 years to amass the amount of training and experience the average teenage athlete receives in a given sport during his or her high school career.

The alarming performance consequences of this deficiency have been revealed in a variety of Force Science research experiments, Lewinski said. He cited, for instance, "decision errors" made by the vast majority of officers in a study of vehicle stop behavior. When confronted by an assailant who unexpectedly pointed a gun at them at close range, most officers tried to draw their own weapon in response rather than grab the offender's gun to disarm him--and found themselves "hopelessly behind the reactionary curve." Many of them "drew awkwardly and had difficulty putting the gun on target."

Unfortunately, decision-making and firearms skills are too often "taught at the speed of qualification, not at the speed of a gunfight, and we develop and use psychomotor skills at the speed we practice them," Lewinski said.

In another experiment, Lewinski explained, Force Science examined the common belief by officers that they can safely avoid an edged weapon assault by moving aside from the line of attack. But in reality, when they're weighted down with duty boots and 20 lbs. of gear, a knife-wielding suspect can be slashing them before they can dodge him.

"We have to train in real-world circumstances," Lewinski said, and we need to significantly increase the amount of time devoted to training. He noted that in some states, 2,000 hours of training are required to get a barber's license, yet as little as 600 hours' training may be mandated to become a sworn LEO.

"We need to train officers to the point that none of their cognitive resources need to be placed on the mechanics of operating their weapon," Lewinski said. "For effective performance, all of an officer's focus needs to be on decision-making," with mechanical operations occurring automatically and subconsciously.

"Discovering how much training is necessary to reach this level" is one of Force Science's primary missions, he said. Another is training the public about the realities of force confrontations.

"There are things that members of the community don't understand very well," Lewinski said. "They often don't understand the law, they don't understand police training, they don't understand the speed at which shootings unfold, and they don't understand the human factors involved.

"When a community calls for justice and seeks satisfaction, these are elements they need to understand." In the near future, he said, Force Science will be expanding its agenda to play a more prominent role in public education.

III. Documentary filmmaker probes force realities at new Force Science Training Center

Patrick Shaver, a young patrol officer from Georgia, was with a civilian friend at dinner when discussion arose about a local vehicle pursuit in which police shot and killed the driver of the fleeing car. "Why didn't they just shoot the tires off the car?" the friend wanted to know. "Why'd they have to shoot him?"

That incident launched 29-year-old Shaver on a passionate personal pursuit. When he couldn't find a film that he felt would adequately explain deadly force realities to his friend, he set out to create a feature-length documentary of his own on officer-involved shootings.

The result, he's determined, will uniquely combine scientific insights into the human dynamics of life-threatening encounters with the impact these events have on the lives of officers who've pulled the trigger.

With a master's degree in conflict management, initial hopes of becoming a hostage negotiator, and three years' street experience with a major department but no formal training in movie-making, he's learned the craft on-task as this ambitious project has progressed.

So far, with his wife serving as his production assistant, he has interviewed on camera more than 30 cops who've survived OISs and about a dozen police-savvy experts on human behavior, criss-crossing the country on his days off to do so.

Recently, Shaver spent several hours with Executive Director Dr. Bill Lewinski at the new Force Science Training Center in Chicago. Asked to

explore "the most important information for civilians to understand" about OISs, Lewinski discussed critical components of the behavior of "officers in the middle of a crisis and how training and natural processes affect them under immense stress."

In particular, he explained the eye-blink speed at which gunfights occur, action/reaction dynamics, the need to read the evolutionary pattern of threats, the decision-making process under time compression, the cognitive and motor mechanics of a response, some of the key findings from FSI research, and the myths about police encounters that have been promulgated by the distortions of Hollywood.

Shaver also filmed some demonstrations by Lewinski, including one illustrating the potential speed of edged-weapon attacks.

Among the other experts Shaver has filmed is Dr. Alexis Artwohl, a former police psychologist, co-author of the book *Deadly Force Encounters*, and an instructor in the Force Science Certification Course.

Shaver plans to complete filming in June and to release the documentary, called *Officer Involved*, late this year or early in 2016. He plans to enter the 90-minute production in a variety of film festivals and then to make it available on DVD.

"My goal is to end up with a film that is not only informative to civilians but also useful to cops--something you can watch at 3 o'clock in the morning with your family after you've been in a shooting and get some insights and comfort about what you're going through," Shaver says.

For more information and to see some of his footage, go to: www.officerinvolved.org. At the website, you can also complete a short contact form if you have been involved in a shooting and would like to be considered as a subject for the film. Shaver says he already has 30 more OIS survivors lined up for interviews but is still looking for more.