



IN THE LINE *Of Fire*

By Mike Conti

A Refocus on the “Front Sight” Concept

Several years ago while participating in a stealth entry as a member of a police tactical unit, I had an experience that set me on an unexpected path. The entry had been successfully made well after dark into a two-story residence. Inside was a suicidal individual armed with a shotgun. As he spoke with a negotiator on the telephone upstairs in his bedroom, we positioned ourselves downstairs to ensure he could not exit the house. After many hours, the negotiator succeeded in calming the subject, and we were instructed over the radio to take him into custody.

We quietly ascended the staircase and rounded the corner in the upstairs hallway. The subject, still on the telephone with the negotiator, suddenly walked out of his bedroom into the hallway and looked at us with a shocked expression. Then he looked down at a 12-gauge pump propped next to him against the wall.

I immediately raised my SIG 9mm (using a two-hand hold) to eye-level and focused my front sight on the subject's center mass as I had been trained to do.

As the subject cast desperate glances first at us, then at the shotgun, then back to us again, I felt my focus literally ripped off the sights and placed on the subject. It was an uncontrollable physiological response that made an indelible impression. (Our subject, incidentally, was taken into custody without incident.)

The reason this experience made such an impression on me was that I been trained to always focus on the front sight in a crisis. I had personally embraced the entire philosophy and had taught it to many other officers as well.

But as I reflected on this incident over the next few months, many of the inconsistencies that had bothered me for years about training methods and actual performance became more and more unsettling. Gradually, my experience in that hallway turned into an obsessive investigation, the culmination of which has resulted in a new police firearms training program that has been administered to over 550 members of my department as of this writing. After several months of

running the new programs in earnest, I feel confident enough to publish some of my findings and the conclusions they have led me to.

For more than 30 years, most US law enforcement agencies have centered their training on marksmanship-oriented techniques. Various types of stationary or moving targets are used at various distances. In order to achieve hits, the emphasis has been on using the sights—especially the front sight—at all distances and under all conditions. And in order to achieve hits under these conditions, that method is indeed correct.

There's a problem, though. During those 30 or so years, officers have averaged hit rates of less than 15 percent when engaged in real-world gunfights.

After examining statistical data from police-involved gunfights and analyzing the training methodologies employed during these past years, the conclusion I have reached is that a gross misapplication of training methodologies has occurred. To put it simply, the best way to achieve consistent hits on targets is to hold the weapon in a highly-stylized stance (such as the Weaver), and employ the sights.

This, however, is not what police officers actually do with their weapons in the field. Regardless of the training they receive within the controlled environment of the range, when faced with an actual close-range threat, human beings react in similar ways and, with few exceptions, exhibit similar responses. They tend to crouch, very often holding the weapon with one hand as opposed to two, and will almost invariably point the weapon at the threat while their eyeballs are locked on to that threat. Contrary to much of what has been accepted as gospel, this focusing on the threat is not only natural but necessary. Officers need to see what is happening—moment by moment—in order to determine whether to fire or not.

Since an officer's focus is on the threat while the incident is occurring, he cannot access the sights as a reference point, even though he has been exhaustively trained to do so on the range. This would normally assist the officer in keeping the weapon

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leveled at the target.

Without that front sight reference, (in combination with the sharply-angled design of most service handguns), it is extremely common for the weapon to be thrust forward, muzzle canted downward. Result: Low hits or complete misses.

Many readers will recognize this as the reasoning behind the “point shooting” technique advocated by the late Col. Rex Applegate. After spending the last 14 years researching, experimenting, and working in the field, I can confidently state that—at least in regard to close-quarter engagements requiring split-second decision-making—Applegate was right.

I had the great fortune to be able to speak and correspond with Col. Applegate prior to his death. He was very generous with much of the information and materials he had gathered over the years. I learned about the training program he developed along with Capt. W.E. Fairbairn for the OSS during WW II. “The House of Horrors” involved taking trainees through a darkened basement where they would have to make life and death decisions at the direction of a trainer. This program was later modified and adapted for use by law enforcement in the form of Hogan's Alley.

Unfortunately, when adapted for law enforcement, these programs very often are set-up as “shoot/don't shoot” courses, employing static or moving targets to represent the threat. But no matter how intricate these courses are, their value is largely limited to marksmanship proficiency. And, as I stated earlier, this is best accomplished using highly-stylized stances and sight-oriented techniques.

The reason these “qualification-type” courses have not properly prepared officers for real-world engagements is that the most critical element: *fear*.

Fear of being injured or killed, fear of hurting or killing another person, fear of making a wrong decision that may result in permanent injury or death.

Without the element of fear, police firearms training is relegated to the type of marksmanship techniques best suited for competition shooting instead of violent encounters. And, as the data indicates, this simply doesn't work.

In our next installment, we'll explore the problem in detail.

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