



By Mike Conti

Opposing Views: Refocusing on the Front Sight Concept, Part IV

This installment will conclude our examination of police firearms training methodologies. What I've attempted to do with this series is explain what we've changed in our firearms training program at the Massachusetts State Police Academy and why we felt it necessary to make these changes.

It comes down to this:

We know that the majority of police-involved deadly force encounters occur at close range (85 percent at 20 feet or closer, 53 percent within 5 feet), in low or dim light, and under conditions of extreme stress.

We also know (and can prove in our House of Horrors) that under these conditions, officers tend to crouch, square themselves to the threat, and—overwhelmingly—find themselves unable to utilize the handgun sights because their eyes are locked on to their assailant.

Yet the majority of training programs continue to expend an inordinate amount of time and effort on teaching highly-stylized marksmanship-type shooting positions and to focus on the sights under all conditions—with the exception of close-quarter, “holster to

IN THE LINE OF FIRE

hip” shooting drills.

The result of years of this type of training has been hit rates averaging below 20 percent in the field. This would indicate that many of our officers are unprepared to stop an immediate threat efficiently. Even more alarming is the fact that if only 20 percent of our rounds are finding their mark, then the other 80 percent are not only missing the threat, but are hitting unintended targets. And *true* misses only occur

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on the range where backstops catch stray rounds.

In addition, we have found that mental conditioning—the foundation of all viable use-of-force training programs—has been neglected in most cases, and incorrectly incorporated in others. Just one example of this misapplication can be found in programs that utilize “reality-type” threat photo targets in place of non-threatening silhouette targets for basic presentation and marksmanship exercises—“draw and shoot” drills.

While it may appear at first glance that using targets depicting human beings holding firearms and presenting an immediate threat would increase the training value, a closer examination reveals that the opposite is true.

Traditional firearms qualification courses are, in actuality, *conditioning* programs. Officers generally stand in front of their target at various distances, pistol holstered. When given a specific stimulus such as a command to fire (or the appearance of a target when a turning target system is used), officers are repeatedly conditioned to stand their ground, draw and fire at the target. This response is rewarded immediately when the officer observes the hit, and further rewarded later when that officer is deemed “qualified” because he placed enough rounds into the target during the course.

What’s the problem?

Well, there is no problem in using these types of drills to develop and polish basic presentation and marksmanship—as long as additional training addressing such skills as moving,

accessing cover, and utilizing good judgment is provided as well.

However, when this basic type of training is "improved" by the use of realistic photo-type targets, with the intention of mentally conditioning our officers to engage real threats, we actually decrease their odds of survival by conditioning them to draw against a drawn gun.

Think about it. The officers stand in front of the target. The signal is given, and the officer draws and fires on an image of a person holding a gun pointed at them.

We are conditioning them to stand still and attempt to outdraw a trigger squeeze.

If you think this is a good idea, try it against someone armed with a weapon loaded with Simunitions FX training rounds. I sincerely recommend you don't try it against an armed individual in a real situation, as many officers have died doing just that.

Have we been intentionally training our people to fail? I don't believe so. I believe that a lot of good-intentioned people have tried to provide the best type of firearms training possible, given the limited support and resources often found in the police industry. I also believe that it was natural to look to well-organized and well-equipped competition shooters and to believe that their highly-developed marksman-

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ship skills should be emulated. After all, many of them can score impressive hits on all types of non-threatening targets under controlled range conditions.

But we just don't do that with our weapons. And that is why the members of the Massachusetts State Police decided it was time to take a fresh look at what we actually do with our pistols, and build a training program around that.

Based upon our success in training, and on reports from the field where it truly counts, we believe that we are on the right track.

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