

POLICE PISTOLCRAFT: THE REALITY-BASED NEW PARADIGM OF POLICE FIREARMS TRAINING

Conti, M.E. (2006). *Police Pistolcraft: The Reality-Based New Paradigm of Police Firearms Training*. North Reading, MA: Saber Press.

Reviewed by Hoon Lee

Sergeant Michael E. Conti of the Massachusetts State Police (MSP) has dedicated himself to the development of firearms training and use of force disciplines for the last two decades. In 2000, after designing and administering a new Firearms Training Unit (FTU) for the MSP, he developed a new police firearms training paradigm under the pretext that marksmanship-oriented regulations cannot “sufficiently prepare the average officer to engage and prevail in a spontaneous lethal force encounter against a moving, thinking aggressor under dynamic, close quarter, uncontrolled conditions” (p. 25). Through his previous two books, *In the Line of Fire: A Working Cop's Guide to Pistolcraft* (1997) and *Beyond Pepper Spray: The Complete Guide to Chemical Agents, Delivery Systems, and Protective Masks* (2002), and more than 100 articles, he has attempted to reveal the reality of shooting incidents and to provide police officers with proper firearms handling skills and management schemes for real situations. In his recent book, *Police Pistolcraft: The Reality-Based New Paradigm of Police Firearms Training* (2006), the author focuses on the way the police use deadly force, criticizes the vague paradigm of old police firearms training procedures, and then introduces detailed contents of recruit-level programs and in-service courses that the author and his colleagues designed for the FTU of the MSP. Currently, he serves as the Director of Aviation Security Policy and Training for the MSP at Logan International Airport and the Director of Saber Group, a private training and consulting firm.

Traditional Police Firearms Training Paradigm

According to the FBI Uniform Crime Reports, “the vast majority (85%) of police-involved shootings occur at distances of 20 feet and less” (p. 26). While most police departments believe that training outcomes can enhance police officers’ real world bullet accuracy, field bullet hit rates are around 20% (Morrison, 2006). These two statistics, based on the actual police shooting outcomes, form the foundation of Conti’s new paradigm of police firearms training.

The author theorizes that departmental overemphasis on both marksmanship and physical skills development may have a negative effect on field shooting performance. Even though most of shooting incidents do not permit use of sights, exclusive emphasis on scores makes officers depend solely on sight-focused techniques. As a result, officers do not focus on close-range shooting practices if they exult to hit the target from 20 yards using marksmanship-oriented styles. Marksmanship-oriented and sight-focused shooting training not only reduces police officers’ adaptability of shooting skills in real situations, but also deprives officers of one-hand hold practices.

New Paradigm Police Firearms Training

Conti and his colleagues considered several factors including the characteristics of current police-involved shooting incidents, shortcomings of marksmanship-oriented firearms training programs, findings of prior research, and relevant federal courts’ decisions when they

designed the Integrated Duty Pistol Training Course (DPTC) to prepare police officers for potential use of deadly force in the field both physically and mentally. Through *Police Pistolcraft*, the author explains how the DPTC has changed an 85% shot-to-miss ratio to an 85% shot-to-hit ratio, improving police firearms training for a new generation of police officers.

Level one: skill development. Level one is designed to develop critical shooting skills that police officers will need while operating in real extreme situations. Police officers build precision shooting skills with sights. Officers also develop point shooting skills that “respond to a close proximity threat stimulus and efficiently deliver aimed rounds to it while focusing on the threat” (p. 94). The author states that these drills are essential prerequisites for close proximity skill development. Officers are required to fire 36 rounds at the distance of seven yards and below. Most rounds are fired with a one-hand hold, but officers are asked to shoot their gun from their holster, use Aerosol Subject Restraint Spray, and verbalize commands “along the lines of ‘Police! Get Down! Hands Out! Palms Up! Don’t Move!’” (p. 97).

Level two: marksmanship and safe handling skills assessment tests. Level two prepares police officers by exposing them to reality-based shooting training. Police firearms trainers should consider the importance of use of firearms “from different positions such as kneeling or prone and then from cover” (Harvey, 2000, p. 8) and “under the dim or no-light conditions” (Jones, 1999, p. 38). Officers are required to use three different positions (prone, kneeling, and standing) and their flashlight on the range reflecting FBI techniques. Officers fire 36 rounds; only six rounds are fired at the distance of more than seven yards. A one-hand hold technique is utilized for 24 rounds at the distance of four yards and below.

Level three: combination drills (movement, cover, judgment, verbalization, and safe handling skills assessment tests). Conti intends that upon completion of level three, police officers will have an increased ability to react to deadly force situations. On signal, participants in a police vehicle escape the cruiser and rush almost 40 yards to a suspect vehicle mock-up. An instructor is always behind them throughout the drill. Using the mock-up as cover, officers are encouraged to use verbal warnings to both threatening and non-threatening targets. Part of this exercise involves a moving threatening target, for example, a man running within ten yards. Because “many officers have failed to see anything but threat, and have shot innocent bystanders as a result,” trainees are informed prior to commencement of the three-minute drill that “the friendly representations down-range are representations of members of [instructors’] family” (p. 109). In this course, the choice to shoot or not is up to police officers, thus, debriefing is followed at the end of the drill.

Level four: scenario-based, dynamic interactive experiential learning/diminished light training. The final step of the DPTC is designed to provide the participants with an opportunity to undergo extreme circumstances. The House of Horrors Program is expected to meet “all of the standards mandated by statute and case law such as: moving targets, reduced light training, judgmental/decisional training, use of cover, realistic environments, policy reinforcement, force level integration and transition, and relevance to assignment” that the old paradigm training programs cannot (pp. 122-123). Walking through nine stations, officers encounter both threatening and non-threatening subjects, which in turn requires them to think and decide whether to shoot or not under this controlled training environment. Trainees encounter a mannequin with a police badge, victim and criminal mannequins in hostage situation, non-threatening civilian dummies, threatening mannequins with a knife or gun, and participating officers themselves reflected in a mirror. Every station requires the participants to use appropriate tactics such as verbal commands, point shootings, flashlight shootings, and various position shootings. It takes normally 13 minutes including debriefing.

New paradigm in-service training and recruit-level training. Since 2000, the author's FTU has exposed both MSP sworn officers and MSP recruits to the DPTC. The primary purpose of in-service training is qualifications, though, the new in-service firearms training paradigm makes officers progress "from a static training level (positional marksmanship and skill development), to a dynamic level (moving, thinking, and shooting), to a dynamic interactive level (thinking, moving, and engaging adversaries under realistic conditions)" (p. 166). Although budgetary pressures limit the in-service training to one day, the author reports that the FTU has been receiving overwhelmingly positive responses from the participants. Furthermore, the new paradigm three-week recruit-level training program has several objectives. In addition to the contents of the in-service training, this program includes basic information and physical skills about firearms, characteristics of police-involved shooting incidents, and legal and procedural knowledge. The author also reports positive feedback from recruit-level participants. Regarding the actual performance including close proximity, low-light, and short duration, compared to 85% shot-to-miss ratio for the last 30 years, the author states that "the involved student officers achieved an average shot-to-hit ratio of approximately 85% during the encounters while employing the Point-Shooting Technique" (p. 190).

Evaluation and Conclusion

Police use of deadly force must be based on case law, state law, and departmental policies (Hontz, 1999). Because problematic departmental policies are a source of civil liability (*Monell v. New York City Department of Social Services*, 1978), police departments should consider the constitutionality of their policies. While many studies have identified poor performance of police shootings, Conti's work does not merely replicate prior research, but translates reality, case law, and prior research into practice. In this regard, *Police Pistolcraft* is a useful guide for police officers and departments.

Police Pistolcraft elaborates on weaknesses inherent in the traditional training paradigm in the process of developing new training schemes. Firearms trainers must focus on in-depth description of police officers' problematic reactions and psychological predicaments. One of the most important elements of the book can be found in his use of tables, photographs, diagrams, and the 157-page appendix. Detailed comparisons about old paradigm practices and DPTC are demonstrated in the text and appendices. Because precise schedules of the new in-service training and recruit-level training paradigms are provided, *Police Pistolcraft* can be used as a model for other departments' firearms training policies. As the author agrees, however, *Police Pistolcraft* is not a panacea for all police-involved shooting incidents. Rather, it is a good turning point for police firearms training. Consequently, discreet replication is recommended. In addition to his conclusion that the results of the DPTC are satisfactory, the changes in terms of the total number of civil complaints and law suits about police use of deadly force in the MSP since 2000 are needed to provide a more objective assessment. In subsequent editions of the book, improved editing of headings and subheadings would make the book more reader friendly.

Police Pistolcraft introduces interesting anecdotes. Even experienced officers do not hit the close-in target, and many officers' gun handling styles reflect Hollywood movie actors' stylizations which are, in reality, very dangerous. There are evident reasons why a well established training module is required. Because *Police Pistolcraft* is based on reality, it can be utilized nationally for police shooting training. As the author indicates, training regulations regarding undercover operations, terrorist threats, emergency vehicle operations, and defensive tactics based on reality are needed in future DPTC training. *Police Pistolcraft* is recommended

for police trainers, police officers, police recruits, police chiefs, as well as university libraries. Police scientists and weapon specialists would benefit from his work.

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