

**PART ONE** Detective Jack Kurgen had been on the force for well over ten years. From his first days as a recruit he had shown a propensity for dogged persistence and hard work, and had proven himself to be an extremely competent investigator. After only three years in the uniformed division he had been given the opportunity to transfer to the homicide investigations unit, where he had again demonstrated not just a great deal of enthusiasm and motivation,

# Mental Preparation: The Foundation for

investigator normally required a greater use of his mental capabilities than his physical capabilities, he also exercised regularly to ensure his survival should a confrontation turn physical. He maintained his weapon and his marksmanship skills to a high degree, always qualifying "expert" during the departments twice-yearly qualification periods. He was a true pro-

they ran down the staircase, neither officer spoke, their minds racing ahead of them to the situation in which they were about to become involved. "Probably a domestic thing," Jack thought to himself, pushing open the outside door of the apartment building.

Rushing into the cool night air, he could see that the large man had gotten the car door open, and did indeed appear to be intent on killing the person within. He had the man by the throat, pulled halfway out of the car, head down on the pavement. The large man's left hand was around the other's throat. The right hand was raised high above. As Jack watched in horror, the event suddenly seemed to slow down. He heard a sound not unlike that of the ocean, except there was no break in it, only static. He felt eerily detached from himself, and found himself wondering what was happening.

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fessional, and was respected by his peers and the community.

One spring evening, while conducting a follow-up interview with a middle-aged man, who had been in the area of recent, unsolved murder, he and his partner were distracted by the sounds of screams emanating from the busy city street outside, two floors below the interviewee's cramped apartment. Rushing to the narrow window, both officers peered through the streaked glass and watched as a large man beat on the window of a parked car. The man was screaming that he was going to kill the individual in the vehicle, and became more incensed as he continued to scream and beat at the glass.

As his fist smashed through the glass on the operator's side window, both officers turned from the window, practically falling over the owner of the apartment, who was crammed in behind them trying to see what the commotion was. As

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The scene suddenly reminded Jack of a painting he had seen once, a painting depicting the slaying of Abel by his brother Cain. For in the large man's hand was some type of blade, a large shiny blade, that seemed suspended there in time. The eyes of the man on the bottom were looking up, fixed on the knife.

"Don't!" Jack screamed, suddenly realizing he had his pistol in his hand. The words seemed to sputter out of his mouth, and the weapon felt awkward in his hands. The blade began to descend. Trying to simply get across the street seemed ominously difficult. The blade sliced into Abel's face. The arm was raised again.

As Jack fired, the large man jumped up, releasing his hold, and turned toward Jack. Blood was streaming down the side of the big man's chest, soaking the gray sweatshirt that he wore. In the light of the street lamp, it appeared as a

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but also a shrewd understanding of what motivated others to act—and to sometimes act violently. This natural insight into human nature, combined with his untiring efforts to do his job as well as he could, resulted in a record of solved homicides equal to any 20-year veteran by the time he had reached the ripe old age of 31. His superiors expected him to go far, and he was being groomed for promotion to a higher level of management.

His success came at a cost though, his family life suffered a bit, but he told his wife and himself it wouldn't go on like this forever. Though his job as a plainclothes

**by Michael E. Conti**

dark, spreading stain. His eyes were mad. He began to move toward Jack, screaming, "You shot me! You shot me! Come on, you want some? Come on."

Jack wanted to move back, but his body would have none of it. He felt frozen to the cracked and dirty pavement. As the figure came toward him all he could see was that bloody knife. He thought of his wife and his young son. He fired again as the man kept coming, more of the gray sweatshirt turning dark. The big man stumbled and fell. The night air suddenly chilled the officer. He heard a strange sound and realized it was himself, gasping for air. His legs felt weak, his head pounded. His hands were shaking.

"My God!" a woman screeched. "You killed him, you killed him," someone yelled. A crowd began to gather. Jack finally broke his gaze from the large, crumpled figure and

An official inquest into the shooting by the department's internal affairs unit vindicated the officers' actions, though they were going to hold off issuing any commendations for the time being due to "political considerations."

After returning to work, Jack found himself being lionized by his fellow officers, most of whom had never been involved in a shooting situation. His home life, which had been shaky for a while due to the strains of the job, now crumbled before his eyes. His wife of nine years disintegrated under the pressures of the severe media attention—ostracized by friends, family members and the final realization of the dangers inherent in her husband's profession. After several battles where she begged him to quit his job and he refused, she did what she felt she had to do. Arriving home one night, he found her, and his son, gone.

drink more to put himself into a dreamless sleep, but still, too often, would wake up screaming and sweating; watching as the big man would get up time after time, bullets tearing into him, knife in hand, that gray sweatshirt black with blood.

His superiors eventually ordered him into counseling. He refused. More problems and then a suspension. His career plummeted. Six years to the day of the shooting, Jack Kurgen stood in his Captain's office, placed his badge and gun down on the green deskmat, and walked away.

The officer, in the above story is fictional, but his story is one that is more common than you might think. After years of watching countless television and movie cops blasting away at the bad guys and then happily walking away—no reports, no bad media coverage, no problems—many people, including many police officers,

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looked around at the staring faces. His partner stood only a few feet away from him, weapon still drawn, shell casings on the ground around him. His face glistened with sweat. "Police! Somebody call an ambulance!" his partner yelled. No one moved. "We're the police," his partner yelled again, holding up his badge for the crowd to see, "Somebody call an ambulance."

Over the next few months, both officers endured all of the baggage that goes with being involved in a lethal-force shooting. The media at first set out to crucify them, insinuating through articles that the officers overreacted or acted improperly. Televised interviews with the family members of the deceased added more fuel to the flames of doubt, as each one explained that Cain "had a few problems with the law" in the past, but was in the process of straightening out his life when he was needlessly gunned down by the police.

Jack began spending more and more time with his partner after work, sitting at a local bar, occasionally talking about it, replaying it, damning it. His partner seemed to handle it better, he thought. After a year or so, his partner transferred out of the unit, and soon after that, stopped going to the bar with him. Jack thought he was all right by now, though he couldn't quite muster the enthusiasm he'd always had for his work. Several times after it had happened, his department offered to get him some counseling, but he'd always refused. His performance continued to decline, as his time at the bar continued to increase.

About three years after the shooting, the nightmares came back. He had figured it was normal to have them at first, but after they had stopped he believed that was it. They began to take on a frightening clarity. They became more regular. Sleep became an enemy. He would

believe that this is how it really is—or should be. Our mental self-images and expectations are often based upon these continuously revised and repeated scenes, which have little or no basis in, or connection to, the day-to-day reality of our professions.

Thankfully, the last few years have led to a revamping of a great many of these attitudes, and both the police community and the society in which we function are being made more aware of the realities of the job. Still, the reality of misinformation and the inane logic of segments of our society remain, and many officers become victimized by the collisions that inevitably occur between them. The purpose of this article, then, is to touch upon some of these problems and misconceptions and, hopefully, in some small way, help us to better prepare ourselves to survive all aspects of the lethal-force encounter. The best place to

start is usually with the foundation, and the true foundation of officer survival is Mind-Set.

### **Mind-set**

These two words define a preset state of mind that is produced when we mentally condition and prepare ourselves for the realities of the lethal-force encounter. All of the firearms training that we do, all of the practice we perform on our own and all of the time we invest in physically exercising our bodies contributes to the tactical advantage that we must possess while working in the field. Of all these contributing factors, however, achieving the proper mind-set is considered the most essential to insuring our survival.

After all is said and done, after all the range scores have been documented, after all the training and practice sessions are completed and all the preparations we individually decide are worth making are set, the ultimate reality for police officers will always be found in those few, terrifying moments when their life or someone else's life hangs in the balance. That is when it all comes together—as our training and conditioning take over and we act with purpose, determination and valor. And, it will all happen in those few, terrifying moments we hope will never come. But when they do, if properly prepared, we will survive. We will win.

Often neglected in relation to other aspects of officer survival training and mental conditioning is the base upon which all other training and tactical skills must be built. It has been suggested that proper mental conditioning can play as much as 75% of the role involved in surviving violent, life-threatening encounters. In the absence of proper mental conditioning, luck becomes the major factor in determining our survival.

The American Heritage Dictionary defines luck as: "The chance happening of fortunate or adverse events." Since these chance happenings cannot be controlled by us, we must then strive to control

those elements involved in lethal-force encounters that we can. By preparing ourselves mentally, we reduce luck's impact dramatically, and put ourselves in greater control of our own destinies.

Too many officers working in today's environment still rely on what psychologists call a "personal fable." This occurs when an officer convinces himself that he is "special" and will never get hurt; he will never run into that one individual who is truly intent, for whatever rea-

lethal-force encounter in our tenure.

### **Understanding Proper Mind-set**

Contrary to common belief, proper mind-set is much more than being alert and maintaining a fierce determination to survive and win any violent confrontation that we may encounter. These attributes, while important, do not address or compensate for the myriad of physical and psychological factors we will have to deal with during a life-threatening encounter. The scenario above illustrates a possible

# The final mental exercise presented for consideration is one you have just participated in by reading this article—exploring tactics and options.

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son, on hurting, killing or maiming him. The fable often becomes more believable to these officers than the events that occur around them. As years go by and nothing "really bad" ever happens to them personally, they begin to believe that their lack of training and practice doesn't matter; or the dangerous tactics that they repetitively employ are good enough for them and anyone else who cares to listen.

Many of these officers may indeed complete their careers without having to face a lethal-force encounter since current statistics indicate that only one-tenth of 1% of an average 25-year career will involve an officer firing his weapon while involved in one. However, current statistics also indicate that there is a "definite possibility" that we will experience at least one

field situation and a few of the many effects one might experience throughout its short duration, such as trying to formulate a plan of action while focusing on a threat. This may be extremely difficult, even impossible, to do depending upon the circumstances.

In the first stages of involvement in a violent situation, your heart rate may become slightly elevated; your hands may get cold and clammy, your mouth dry. Breathing may get shallow. Psychologically you enter a "what if" stage of awareness. Your conscious mind, acknowledging a challenge, begins to create doubt by introducing negative thoughts. Confident in your training, you counter these with positive thoughts.

As the severity of the threat increases, you may experience an

uncontrollable upper-body quiver. Your hands may shake and your knees may get weak. Your heart may begin to pound in your chest and you may begin to hyperventilate. Psychologically, doubts or negative thoughts may increase. At this point you must employ simplistic ideas and have true confidence in yourself and your training. As the threat continues, your perceptions may be altered. Approximately 50% of officers involved in life-threatening situations experience visual distortions. Tunnel vision occurs when the conscious mind disconnects and logic no longer functions. You may see things as being larger or smaller than their actual size, or happening in faster or slower motion. You may hallucinate or see a mental flash of your family.

You may experience "auditory blocking," hearing important sounds only faintly or not at all. You may consciously "black out" altogether, reverting completely to your training. As the "fight or flight" syndrome is experienced, your blood is diverted to the larger muscle groups in your body, your arms and legs. It is inversely shifted at the expense of smaller muscle groups, affecting things like finger dexterity and hand-eye coordination.

At this point you will only do the things you have trained to do according to a rehearsed plan. As the subconscious mind takes over to deal with the immediate threat, you may draw your weapon and fire as you have been trained. As you watch, the subject may appear to stumble in slow motion and fall soundlessly to the ground. Then, your head automatically scans left to right as you have done countless times during range training, opening up your field of view and allowing you to search for any secondary threats. You are suddenly aware that you don't know how many shots you have fired, yet as you look at the weapon in your hand, you see that you have decocked it and lowered it to the ready position.

Your training has been effective; you have performed professionally,

and, as unfortunate as it is that you have had to take a human life, you must accept that you had no other choice. A large part of mentally preparing for the possibility of having to employ deadly force involves coming to terms with this facet of our chosen occupation. It is unique to our job (excluding military service) that we go to work each day knowing that the possibility exists that one of us may have to kill another human being in the performance of our duty.

### **Repetition of the Basics**

The more training we do, the more correctly we perform repetitions while we practice drawing, reloading, dry-firing and live-firing. In turn, these physical actions become more ingrained on our subconscious. Should our conscious mind suddenly "shut off" due to a violent sensory overload, it is the subconscious mind and the ingrained training that we have imprinted on it that will take over and see us through.

### **Imaging**

Imaging is a technique that has been successfully used by professional athletes for many years. It basically involves the user "visualizing" himself performing a physical task correctly and successfully in his mind. The more often it is done, the better the results are when the user actually performs the task. The really interesting thing here is that studies have shown that the subconscious mind cannot distinguish between imagined memory and real memory. The benefit of adapting this technique becomes readily apparent. Instead of actually having to experience a life-threatening encounter to see what we would do, we can create them in our minds, examine options, decide on tactics and successfully engage and prevail in numerous extreme scenarios. This advanced form of "day dreaming" is best when used in everyday situations, both on and off duty. By simply playing a controlled game of "what if," we actually provide our subconscious minds

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with an incredible variety of options, choices and tactics. When a real situation presents itself, we will experience an overwhelming sensation of "having been here before," and will not be engulfed by panic. We will act as we have rehearsed in our minds.

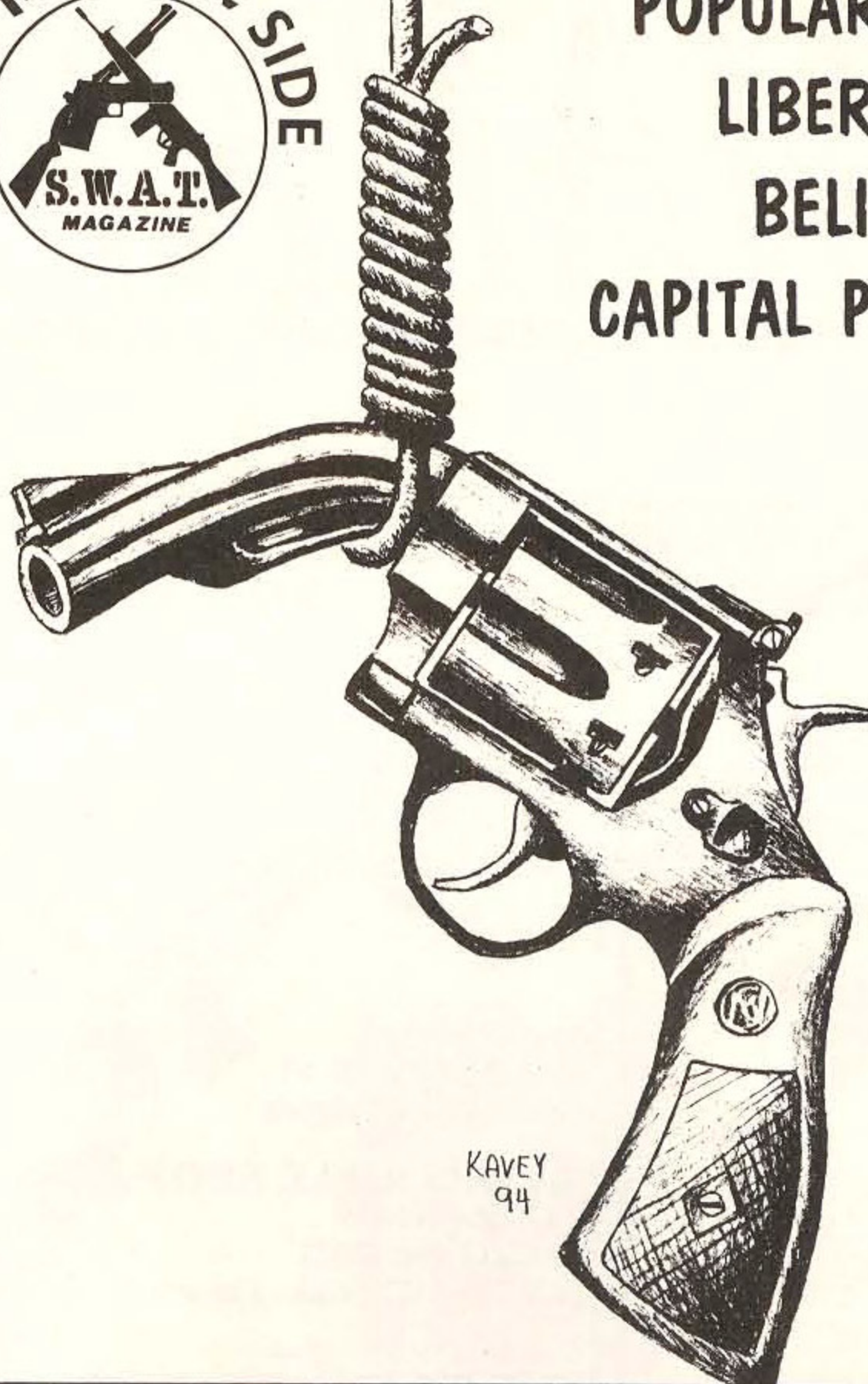
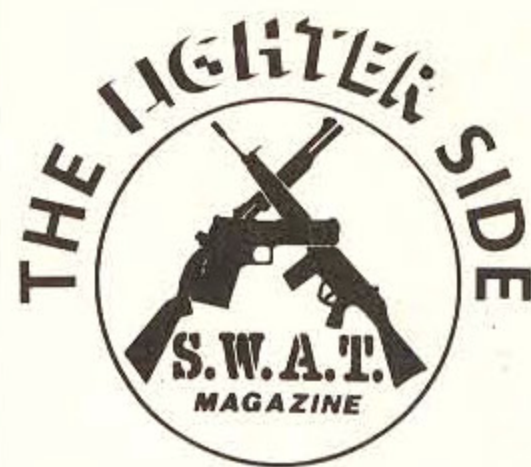
For uniformed officers conducting a motor vehicle stop, imagine the operator suddenly exiting his vehicle and running toward you while keeping his hands in his pockets. What would you do? What would you say? Where would you move?

Scenarios should be geared to working environments and situations for narcotic and investigative personnel. While making an undercover purchase of narcotics in a bar, the suspects, believing you're a small-time dealer, decide to rip you off for your money and put a major hurt on you so you won't be back. What would you do? If a knife or gun was suddenly produced, where in the bar could you move for cover? If you're acting as a cover-person for the officer in the bar, what would you do if your partner was suddenly downed?

While using imaging, the composition of the imagined situations should incorporate two critically important elements: First, every scenario should end with you being successful. Secondly, keep the scenarios and your actions in them realistic. Training ourselves to act foolishly or to ignore the realities of a threat and/or our own limitations will only serve to place us in jeopardy when we want to be in the safest, most tactically advantageous position possible.

### Breathing

The act of breathing slowly and deeply as a means of calming the body and the mind to reduce stress and increase control and focus is well-known to anyone who has ever participated in the martial arts. This practice is also extremely beneficial for reducing stress caused by any activity or circumstances. The basic



**CONTRARY TO  
POPULAR OPINION,  
LIBERALS DO  
BELIEVE IN  
CAPITAL PUNISHMENT!**

exercise is to breathe in deeply while mentally counting to six, hold the breath for another slow six-count, and then release slowly for six again. This simple activity will help us control our stress levels during violent encounters as well as during our careers and lives—possibly saving us in the long run.

### Tactical Education

The final mental-exercise presented for consideration is one that you have just participated in by reading this article—exploring tactics and options. There is an abundance of solid, worthwhile police tactics and training manuals, books, magazines and videotapes currently available on the market. The good ones are often expensive, but books such as Calibre Press' *The Tactical Edge* and its predecessor, *Street Survival: Tactics for Armed Encounters* are invaluable and contain a wealth of vital information that is presented in an entertaining, fascinating format. The yearly Street Survival Seminars presented by Calibre Press have

also been extremely well-received by the law enforcement community as both timely and necessary.

The investment in this facet of our profession is not only tax deductible, it is our responsibility to ourselves, our families and each other. We've got to be better than the ones who decide they just don't care anymore, or the ones who never cared. And, we've got to be able to take care of ourselves and each other. Because out there, for all intents and purposes, we're all we've got. ●

*[In Part Two of this article, we will be taking a look at an aspect of the lethal-force encounter that is often ignored, yet is as serious a potential threat to us as an armed suspect. Some of its effects were illustrated in the opening scenario. It is sometimes called "after-burn," and unless we prepare ourselves for it, we leave ourselves open to an attack from an enemy we may never escape—ourselves.]*