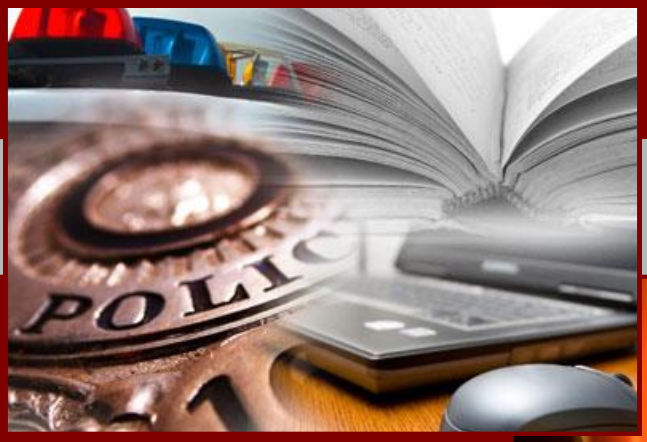

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# The ILEETA Journal

ILEETA

International Law Enforcement
Educators and Trainers Association

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# Can Your Officers "Land the Aircraft"? The Four C's of Experiential Gunfighting

by Ken Murray, Dan Fraser & Jeff Johnsgaard

As a trainer, you are a brain surgeon. During facilitated experiential learning, trainers are poking around inside the brains of their students. Scenario based training has been shown to wire the brain for a response in anticipation of a future encounter. Such training creates a Rolodex® card of sorts, and under conditions of high stress a mind that has not been completely overwhelmed will run through its Rolodex of experiences looking for a cue card that roughly matches the situation the officer has found themselves in. In compressed time conditions, the mind does not necessarily evaluate the response, it just loads and goes. Trainers, therefore, have the daunting responsibility to ensure the optimal responses are cataloged, and this can most effectively be done through success oriented realistic training.

Here's an all-too-common scenario: An officer is placed into a training situation where the correct legal, ethical, and tactical thing to do is to shoot the simulated offender. So, the officer fires non-lethal training ammunition at the role player subject. Shot placement is relatively accurate, so in this instance the officer "wins" the gunfight as subjectively determined by either the role player or the trainer. The subject is down and a stop is called by the trainers. This is followed by, "Ok, let's see where your rounds went". Everyone circles up to see that the marking cartridges struck the subject in the centre of mass, neck or head. Next is high fives all around, a few points for improvement from the trainers and everyone resets for the next scenario or drill. Sound familiar?

Here's the problem – even during a success based training scenario, the above example could still be setting the student up for failure because in the real world this is not where the encounter ends. This is where much of the really interesting stuff is just beginning. The unintended consequence of this well-intended training is that officers may find themselves on the winning end of a real gunfight from a ballistic perspective, but they have no index card in their mind as to what to do next.

A number of years ago, one of the students in our 5 Day Instructor program worked as a pilot for a sophisticated military organization. We talked about this "missing conclusion" issue, and how we must provide something for our students to do *after* the shots are fired, or they will be missing a set of potentially life saving skills. This student related a personal experience from overseas. He and his unit were in their first horrific battle in which they were successful and he performed in a textbook fashion. But, on the return to base, he nearly crashed his helicopter. He didn't have a Rolodex card that included landing the aircraft *after* such an encounter. All of the complex air combat simulation training he had received left out landing, since, according to the organization, those pilots already knew how to land. He said it was an extremely focusing moment for him and, later as flight instructor, he set the simulators to include landing the chopper after the gunfight.

Can your officers "land their aircraft?" Do they have a trained set of skills beyond shooting proficiency by which they can continue after the shots are fired, and until they are safely "on the ground?" In our context this means that the subject(s) is in custody and the scene is safe.

What to do after the subject is down is often messaged in the classroom, but those skills will not be retained if they are not transferred in-state during drills and scenarios. In

far too much training where there is gunplay, the whistle is blown immediately after the last shot is fired. On a video simulator the scene ends after the gunfire, and on the static range the target edges. Where is the opportunity to "land the aircraft"?

What can and should officers be doing in those next critical moments while waiting for back-up to arrive? As Brian Willis, one of North America's leading officer safety trainers, would ask, "What's important now?" The body can't go where the mind hasn't been. If officers have not trained an optimal response, they will not magically know what to do.

Thankfully, there is a checklist for what needs to happen next. It is known as "The 4 Cs" - Cover, Condition, Communication and Controlled Breathing.

The 4 Cs provides a set of actions that someone in a state of arousal can use to continue *thinking* and *doing.* There are actually close to 17 things that fold in to accomplishing the full list, but when practiced and integrated in-state, it becomes a single set of behaviors and an internal voice to guide you while your barrel is still hot.

**Cover** – Find Some. Resist the urge to rush toward the subject and go hands–on. This happens frequently with poorly trained officers. Stop it. What is the urgency to take this person into custody?

Move to a position of advantage. This can be a piece of bullet stopping cover that also offers concealment - like the stacked pillars of a vehicle or a concrete wall - is a great option. However, this is not always available. Even if both you and the subject are in an open field, some positions will be better than others. Look to move to a spot where the subject can't see you. Can you still see the subject's weapon? If you can, that's a bonus. You want to be in a position where the subject must visually acquire you and make an overt motion to be able to attack you again. When possible, look to put some distance between you and the subject. Distance gives you time, and time gives you options. This cover position should be continually evaluated, officers should be encouraged to consider other options and to change positions to gain further advantage.

**Condition** – Of your weapon and yourself. Have you been shot or stabbed? Is your weapon still functional? It's not uncommon for officers to end their training shooting with a stoppage or an empty magazine – and they don't even know it. They continue to cover the downed subject with their slide locked to the rear. This C is a prompt to check your weapon.

Realize that the adrenaline dump from this encounter may mask any injuries you have – for now. A simple to way to check yourself while keeping your eyes on the threat is to systematically pat your body with your free hand and then bring it up in front of you to check for blood. Multiple officers at a scene can check each other. What is the condition of the suspect? What is the condition of the situation? Responding units will benefit from knowing.

**Communication** – With dispatch, the subject and yourself. Slow down and get the right information out over the radio the first time. Many officers are in a rush to get on the air to ask for backup. That's fine, but how quickly are they going to get there, realistically? Even if you have back up arrive within one minute, a lot can happen in that time if you haven't found cover and made sure that your weapon is functional. Are you communicating with and controlling any bystanders?

Are you communicating with *yourself*? Self-talk is always happening and it ought to be positive, even if you are seriously injured. Keeping your head in the game can be critical to your survival. Just ask Orange County Deputy Sheriff Jennifer Fulford who got caught in a crossfire in a garage with two people trying to kill her, a disabled gun hand, an empty weapon and ten bullets in her body (three more in her gear) within a 47 second encounter. The difference that morning was self-talk, determination and training that did not end after the gunfire.

**Controlled Breathing** – Controlled breathing reduces

anxiety and physiological arousal such as respiratory rate, heart rate and heart rate variability. Attending to your breathing focuses the mind and allows for better decision making.

Controlled breathing is often taught using the box (aka combat) breathing technique. This involves a deliberate inhale through the nose for a count of four, holding for a count of four, exhaling through the mouth for a count of four, and holding again for four.

Another, more optimal, breathing technique that may be new to trainers and officers is the cyclic (or physiological) sigh. This involves two inhales (preferably through the nose) – one to fill the lungs, and then a second to sneak in a little more air. Next is a *long* exhale through the mouth to empty the lungs. Even just one sigh can be effective at immediately reducing (but obviously not eliminating) the stress response (Balban, et al, 2023).

Like all other actions, the 4 Cs needs to be built in as a trained response. During training scenarios, it is astounding to observe how many people who have been taught about controlled breathing still had no skill in using it. Of course not. It is taught in a classroom, or by the command "scan and breathe" barked during static firearms training, but not actioned or addressed *in-state* during scenarios.

The 4 Cs are not reserved for individual actions. The 4 Cs can also be used for shootings involving multiple officers. All it takes is for one officer on a scene to call, "Four Cs everyone!" This serves to remind others what their priorities are and works very well in chaotic scenes like active assailants.

There is no official order to the 4 Cs. The most important thing is that they get done. As officers are trained in this method through realistic, high-fidelity drills and scenarios, some will begin to perform them simultaneously, such as breathing while moving to cover.

Like all actions that we expect officers to perform under stress, this must be reinforced as part of every drill and scenario. One response to this method from naïve trainers has been, "We can't afford the training time to do this." Bottom line - You are the brain surgeon and you can't afford not to.

Resources:

Balban, B, et al. (2023) Brief structured respiration practices enhance mood and reduce physiological arousal. *Cell Reports Medicine*, Vol. 4 (1) https://www.cell.com/cell-reports-medicine/fulltext/S2666-3791(22)00474-8

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Murray, K. (2006) *Training at the Speed of Life: The Definitive Textbook for Police and Military Reality Based Training,* Vol. 1

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**About the Authors**

*Ken Murray is the Director of Training for the Reality Based Training Association (RBTA.net). He has spent his entire career as a police and military trainer, specializing in the field of Reality Based Training. He is the co-founder of SIMUNITION® and the author of the book Training At The Speed Of Life. He can be reached at ken@rbta.net*

*Dan Fraser is a retired Sergeant and tactics trainer for a large Canadian agency. He continues to train officers in instructor development and human factors in use of force. He is the author of the book Kickass Presentations. He can be reached at frasertrainingsolutions@shaw.ca*

*Jeff Johnsgaard is a police Sergeant and use of force instructor in Canada. He is a Master Instructor and the Canadian Regional Training Director for the Reality Based Training Association. He can reached at jeff@naturaltactical.com*