

Features Opinion

Mastering safety in high-risk environments: A look at training protocols

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In *Deep Survival*, author Lawrence Gonzales states that in any high-risk endeavour, accidents and deaths are inevitable. This statement does not bode well for those who spend their careers in high-risk environments, both training and operationally. Thankfully, Gonzales later states, “Such accidents have to happen. But they don’t have to happen to you and me.”

Since 2010, there have been 12 officers killed with firearms during training in North America.¹ However, no organization closely keeps track of the many injuries and close calls that occur, and a recent near-hit tragedy at the Ontario Police College² has prompted this article. Though some officers are injured or killed during control tactics training, here we will focus on scenario and reality-based training using firearms.

Three types of people get others killed or injured: the unlucky, the inexperienced and the highly experienced. The first two are obvious, but the third deserves a closer look. We have unfortunately seen highly experienced, smart and caring trainers do things that are simply not optimal.

“Big boy rules”

The phrase “Big Boy Rules” (BBR) or, similarly, “we’re all professionals here”, is often used where everyone is expected to use common sense, to follow rules that perhaps have not been clearly defined and to act like adults. Hearing this phrase should cause you to stop and critically evaluate what is meant by it – and cause you to ask more questions.

A major police service’s SWAT team in the eastern U.S. was training with marking cartridges (non-lethal training ammunition – NLTA). Because their facemasks did not allow the officers to get a cheek weld to their carbines, they decided the masks would not be worn. Instead, they declared BBR and elected for “no head shots” during training. This day ended in tragedy—thankfully not death—when an officer was shot in the face. The projectile entered his skin and travelled around his skull to end up near the back of his head.

In any motor skill, there is time between perception and action, effectively causing us to aim at the past and hit the future. Even with the intention to keep shots low, a person can easily duck, fall or flinch, such that their head ends up where their chest was only fractions of a second earlier.

The “no head shots” rule may also inadvertently cause a training scar. Officers start to see the head as an off-limits target, which can be dangerously carried into the operational environment.

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Using BBR in this case meant not wearing important protective equipment, which led to a completely preventable injury. It lazily placed the onus for important safety considerations on the student and not on the exercise controller or safety officer.

For safety in training, we can only fire live rounds at fake people or specialized fake rounds at live people. Most fatal incidents occur when live weapons or ammunition are inadvertently introduced into the training environment, especially where NTLA is being used. The best way to prevent this is to have clear safety protocols and a clear designation between the training and the live environments.

In some training environments, it is absolutely necessary to have officers armed with live firearms to act as outward-facing scene security for the trainees. This requires extra protocols to ensure that these armed individuals do not physically interact with those who are involved in the training event.

“Let me show you something real quick”

That statement should make the hair on the back of your neck stand up.

A near-hit occurred in a mid-western agency when an officer was posted to provide security for a training venue. During the lunch break, he became intermixed with the students. The officer was eager to be involved in the training as he excitedly spoke with the students about the tactics of the day. A version of “Let me show you something real quick” was uttered and the officer drew a live firearm. Luckily, no shots were fired, but this weapon was produced in a training environment before anyone realized they were on the precipice of tragedy.

Tactics and demonstrations must only occur in the confines of tightly scripted scenarios and drills. Everyone involved must enforce zero tolerance for off-script activities.

Training tragedies are often the result of lax safety parameters by well-intentioned trainers. This could be the failure of not having a designated and trained safety officer whose primary role is to ensure scene safety, and that no live weapons enter. There should always be a controlled access point and a search of every person who crosses into the training area – including observers and other officers who stop by for a brief period. Well-trained safety officers should use a checklist and hold everyone accountable to the process.

The safety officer is not the scene security officer mentioned above. The security officer(s) must be completely removed from the training venue. If we want the armed site security officer to rotate into the training, there should be a procedure for that, which takes place at the one and only access point monitored by the designated safety officer.

In summary

So, what should you do if you hear the above phrases? Pause, ask questions and stay vigilant. Every officer should view training safety as their responsibility and should feel completely comfortable to call a time out for safety without recrimination. For example,

“Time out for safety everyone! I just realized that I still have some live Taser cartridges on me.” Excellent, let’s deal with that. Let’s find out how and why this occurred to see if anything else has snuck through, so we can prevent it from happening again.

Stay alert and remember: though accidents will occur, they don’t have to happen to you and me.

References

1. Officer Down Memorial Page, accessed at <https://www.odmp.org/>.
2. “Instructor charged after gun fired during training at police college.” The London Free Press. October 2023. Accessed at <https://lfpres.com/news/local-news/police-report-police-college-instructor-charged-pair-sought-in-robbery#>.

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