

**LAW ENFORCEMENT ASSASSINATIONS
A PROACTIVE RESPONSE**

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May 2011

COMMAND COLLEGE CLASS 48

The Command College Futures Study Project is a FUTURES study of a particular emerging issue of relevance to law enforcement. Its purpose is NOT to predict the future; rather, to project a variety of possible scenarios useful for strategic planning in anticipation of the emerging landscape facing policing organizations.

This journal article was created using the futures forecasting process of Command College and its outcomes. Defining the future differs from analyzing the past, because it has not yet happened. In this article, methodologies have been used to discern useful alternatives to enhance the success of planners and leaders in their response to a range of possible future environments.

Managing the future means influencing it—creating, constraining and adapting to emerging trends and events in a way that optimizes the opportunities and minimizes the threats of relevance to the profession.

The views and conclusions expressed in the Command College Futures Project and journal article are those of the author, and are not necessarily those of the CA Commission on Peace Officer Standards and Training (POST).

LAW ENFORCEMENT ASSASSINATIONS A PROACTIVE RESPONSE

On Sunday, November 29, 2009, at approximately 8:00 am, Lakewood Sgt. Mark Renninger and Officers Ronald Owens, Tina Griswold, and Greg Richards were seated inside the Forza Coffee Shop in Lakewood, Washington. While they sat working on their laptops, preparing for another shift in this normally quiet community, they had no way of knowing that their lives were about to end violently.

At about 8:15 am, Maurice Clemmons, who had a long criminal history in both Arkansas and Washington, walked into the Coffee Shop and approached the counter. As he did so, he suddenly spun around and opened fire on the officers with a semi-automatic handgun. Sergeant Renninger and Officer Griswold were both killed before they had a chance to react. Officer Owens was able to stand up, but was killed before he was able to engage the suspect. Officer Richards, however, engaged in a brief struggle with Clemmons, shooting him in the abdomen, before he succumbed to his injuries.

Two days later, a Seattle police officer was seated in his patrol car recovering a stolen vehicle in south Seattle when a suspect began approaching his vehicle from the rear. The officer recognized the suspect as matching Clemmons' description, which had been broadcast across the nation. The officer engaged the suspect as he turned to flee, while reaching for what the officer believed to be a weapon. The officer fired at the suspect several times as he fled, causing the suspect to collapse and die nearby. The suspect was identified as Clemmons, who still had Lakewood Officer Richards' handgun in his possession. Most law enforcement experts believe Clemmons was approaching the Seattle officer to commit another unprovoked assassination of a

law enforcement officer. Tragically, this is not an isolated incident, but indicative of a disturbing trend.

A Frightening Trend

Since law enforcement officers first began protecting communities, they have lost their lives in the performance of their duties. Traffic accidents, domestic violence calls, high-risk vehicle stops and arrest situations are all circumstances holding the risk of serious injury or death. Over the last couple of years, though, there has been a shift from officers dying or being seriously injured by these traditional means to scenarios similar to that described above; they are being assassinated for no apparent justification whatsoever. They are not being killed because of specific actions; they are being targeted for simply “who they are” or “what they represent.” A review of the past twenty-four months reflects that reality:

- On Saturday, April 4, 2009, three Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania police officers were killed when a suspect ambushed them as they responded to a call. The suspect shot and killed the first two officers as they approached the front door of a residence. When the third officer, who was off-duty and on his way home after the end of his shift, responded to the call for help, he was shot and killed as he exited his car. The suspect later surrendered after a four-hour standoff and shootout, during which he was shot several times.
- On October 31, 2009, a Seattle, Washington police officer was shot and killed, and his partner wounded, when a vehicle drove up next to them as their marked patrol car was parked on the side of the road. They had just completed an unrelated traffic stop when the suspect vehicle drove up next to them and the occupants opened fire, killing the officer before he had a chance to react.

- On January 9, 2010, an Anchorage, Alaska police officer was shot while seated in his patrol car working on an unrelated cold report. The suspects drove up and shot the uniformed officer for no apparent reason. To date, no motives have been found and no suspects have been taken into custody in either of these assassinations.
- On November, 26, 2010, a Chicago, Illinois police officer was shot and killed for no apparent reason as he processed the scene of a burglary investigation. Most recently, on January 23, 2011, in Detroit, Michigan, a lone gunman walked into the front lobby of a Detroit police station unannounced and opened fire with a shotgun, shooting four officers before he was finally killed by return gunfire.

Even though we have seen an increase in the number of these unprovoked attacks, similar types of attacks have occurred in the past. In the late 1960s and early 1970s, groups like the Black Panthers and others, targeted peace officers for assassination. What differentiates those attacks from the ones we are seeing today is that these groups were organized group efforts that were planned as an “attack” with a specific “purpose,” presumably to intimidate and possibly discourage certain responses by law enforcement as a whole. Today’s attacks do not share these same goals. As noted by police psychologist Dr. Lawrence Blum, “The predatory behavior seen by these individuals is unlike anything we’ve seen in the past.”

Under the current circumstances, there seems to be no “organized” effort, no larger motive, and no other overarching “plan” behind these attacks. These officers are presumably being killed simply as an act of violence. As noted in a recent CNN article, Florida Police Benevolent Association representative Hal Johnson stated, “It is a very disturbing trend for all of us...I don’t know what’s going on out there, but I’ve never seen it like this. I do see the developing of a callousness. It’s almost as if shooting a police officer has lost its shock effect.”

These attacks are absolutely unprovoked, unnecessary and serve no foreseeable purpose whatsoever.

A Need to Act

Since January of 2000, 1622 officers have lost their lives protecting and serving their communities, which means an average of 162 officers have died in the line of duty each year since then (National Law, 2010). Even excluding the 72 law enforcement officers who lost their lives on 9/11 in the attacks on the World Trade Center, that means an average of 155 officers have been killed each year – one nearly every 56 hours – in the United States since the start of the 21st century. While this average has changed little over the last couple of decades, the incidents of officers being ambushed under these circumstances have increased.

The National Law Enforcement Officers Memorial Fund (NLEOMF), in conjunction with Concerns of Police Survivors (COPS), publishes annual data regarding officers killed in the line of duty. In their just-released preliminary report for 2010, the NLEOMF specifically notes, “Even more alarming, multiple fatality shootings accounted for nearly 20 percent of all fatal shootings...For the second year in a row, officers continue to be shot in ambush style attacks. In 2010, twelve officers were killed in these vicious attacks.” (National Law, 2010, p. 1) These incidents continue to occur throughout the nation and in every size law enforcement organization.

While these facts are alarming to most individuals, the law enforcement community as a whole is not responding with as much drive and determination to overcome this trend as most people might expect. Although the NLEOMF publishes statistics and data on officers killed each year, this issue is rarely being discussed within major law enforcement publications, which are frequently found to be discussion points for “hot” law enforcement topics. It is time for law

enforcement as a whole to take this threat seriously and develop plans to address a problem that does not appear to be going away on its own.

Determining Causes

To uncover reasons for this disturbing trend, traditional causes and key factors in the deaths of officers were explored. These included issues such as officer safety levels dropping, gang and drug violence escalating, the increased proliferation of handgun availability, and increases in “three-strikes” legislation. While these issues were found to potentially have some impact on the issue, very little substantiated data could be located to make these impacts significant. For example, when the topic of suspects assaulting and/or killing law enforcement personnel is discussed, some immediately point to parolees as a major concern and/or source of discussion. In their article *Three-strikes laws and police murders: Do the data indicate a correlation?* (Guffey, Kelso, & Larson, 2009) the authors use the U.S. Department of Justice’s Uniform Crime Report (UCR) data and statistical analysis to compare officers killed and assaulted data with states that have passed three strikes legislation. Their conclusions found no definitive correlation between the two. In another study, though (Kaminski, Marvell, & Moody, 2002), the authors concluded there was a correlation between these laws and the nature and frequency of officer deaths.

A panel of experts was convened by the author to study the traditional crime-related reasons for officer deaths, as well as determine if there were other lesser thought of causes for this trend. The panel consisted of law enforcement experts in firearms and officer safety tactics, gang and probation personnel, an educator, police psychologist, religious leader, and a college student. They determined some of the most significant trends impacting the rise of spontaneous officer assaults to be major court decisions that affect law enforcement search and seizures,

parolee release rates, media sensationalism and the overall health of the economy. Of all the trends the panel identified, the most interesting and significant of these was societies' tolerance of violent acts, as well as its overall value of life. In both cases, it was the panel's belief that society has grown much more tolerant of violent acts and that its overall value of life has declined significantly. As noted by Dr. Blum, "Society overall is devolving when it comes to values-based issues."

Finding Solutions

Traditionally, law enforcement organizations have taken the stance that their role in society was to protect and serve. As such, they rarely became involved in values-based issues such as immigration, welfare initiatives and religion. Traditional law enforcement topics, such as crime and punishment, can be directly correlated with the core law enforcement mission. When discussing "values-based" concepts though, the correlation is not as clear.

The closest most law enforcement organizations got to anything values-based was when they began teaching the Drug Abuse Resistance Education (DARE) program in the 1980s. Since drugs have generally been considered to have a negative impact on society, and particularly because this program focused on youth, no one took issue with law enforcement's public stance on this one side of the issue. However, the time has come, in light of this current trend, for law enforcement leaders to speak out and get involved in values-based discussions, especially with regard to society's tolerance of violent acts.

While individual police executives need to address the tolerance of violence and its affects on communities, major law enforcement organizations, such as the International Association of Chiefs of Police (IACP), the National Tactical Officers Association (NTOA) and others, should support and conduct further research into the trends identified in officer

assassinations to search for the root causes of these assassinations. This will help provide steps agencies and their officers can take to minimize and/or avoid these situations altogether.

Meanwhile, law enforcement executives need to continue to highlight these incidents whenever the opportunity arises. Although these incidents are traumatic for any agency when they occur, executives need to also take these opportunities to point out what these trends are and how their specific incident directly affects their communities. Groups like the IACP and NATO also need to get more involved in the legislative process to ensure that legislative bodies understand how their decisions have a significant impact on this issue.

Police organizations also want to examine their operations to determine what steps can be taken to increase the likelihood these incidents can be avoided or their survivability increased. Do the “rules of engagement” need to be altered in response to this disturbing phenomenon? Frankly, yes. While community oriented policing talks of opening up relations with communities, this does not mean that law enforcement organizations need to let down their guard. While decentralization allows agencies to open up precinct stations and offices directly in the communities they serve, this does not mean that safety measures and target hardening strategies should be neglected or abandoned in the process.

Response and deployment strategies need to be altered to reduce the likelihood that these incidents will occur or be successful. Officer safety training needs to be developed that will increase an officer’s ability to respond to and survive these incidents, both mentally and physically. Today’s officers need to understand the threats they face and prepare mentally for the violent encounters they may face at any moment. They need to be taught how to deal with ambush situations while standing on a sidewalk talking to citizens, eating in restaurants, and sitting in a non-public substation. How many officers can say that they have actually been

required to draw a weapon and fire it from inside a vehicle without ever leaving the seat?

Simunition guns and other new technologies make this possible. While some will tell you that this is being done, the reality is that the frequency is very limited. This can no longer be the case. Officers must improve their skills in firearms and tactical response and many good schools are available that specialize in improving these skills, including many in the private sector.

Officers need to take steps to give themselves the best opportunity for survival.

A Concerted Effort

Law enforcement at all levels need to take steps to ensure the safety of themselves and the communities they serve. This issue must be addressed, and it will require a comprehensive plan of action and concerted effort from everyone in the law enforcement community, at all levels, in order to be successful. What happened to Lakewood Sgt. Mark Renninger and Officers Ronald Owens, Tina Griswold, and Greg Richards as they were seated inside the Forza Coffee Shop that day may have been unavoidable. As Dr. Blum noted during his discussion of unprovoked attacks by these predators, “Even if you paste feathers on a scorpion, it will still sting, because it’s still a scorpion.” There is something law enforcement can do, though, to minimize the potential of this and similar circumstances in the future. It is incumbent upon us to do whatever is necessary to effect such change now and into the future.

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