

[January 25, 2009]

'It will shoot back at you'

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CHARLESTON, W.Va. -- You're a security officer at your local high school. You walk around the corner just as a group of kids jumps up from behind a bush and soaks some classmates with the streams from a barrage of squirt guns. Enraged, one of the offended teens pulls a gun and starts shooting at his attackers. Or he turns and points the gun at you.

Do you shoot him?

When? What about the innocent kids standing nearby?

In the real world, such life-and-death situations happen in fractions of seconds. For a police officer, a mistake can mean getting shot yourself, the death of an innocent bystander or hostage, or killing a criminal who turns out not to have been a serious threat.

A mistake on the Kanawha County Sheriff's Department's new shoot/no-shoot simulator, though, simply results in a lesson learned the hard way, a bruised ego and maybe a sore arm.

"It will shoot back at you, and it will put a pretty good welt on you," said Sheriff Mike Rutherford.

Rutherford spent \$36,000 for the high-tech simulator, which helps teach deputies when to shoot and when not to under dozens of different scenarios. The simulator is made up of a high-definition video screen that takes up an entire wall, a control and monitoring system that plays interactive videos that can be altered at the touch of a button, and a high-speed air cannon that is capable of firing hard plastic pellets at trainees to simulate return gunfire.

They hurt.

Trainees use a real gun with its barrel replaced by an infrared projector to shoot at targets on the video screen. Computer software keeps track of each and every shot, so officers can review where they hit, where they missed and where they went astray. The entire thing can be recorded by a video camera for future review.

"It will get your blood pumping," said Sgt. J.D. Meadows, one of seven deputies training to instruct other officers on the machine.

Just like watching a movie, the training videos show pictures of real people, life-sized, in different situations. In one of the more grueling scenarios, the

trainee and a partner have to clear a warehouse full of armed men and women holding hostages.

It's quite possible to shoot an innocent bystander -- or your partner. "The big thing on this is judgment," said Rutherford. It doesn't help much to be a good shot if you shoot the wrong person.

Sometimes, the right decision is not to shoot at all. In one scenario, you're waiting at your police cruiser while your partner talks to a drunk man in the car in front of you.

Suddenly, the driver backs up, hits your partner with his car and speeds away. The correct decision is to just let him go.

Most of the scenarios have alternate endings, so deputies never know what a suspect is going to do. Sometimes a suspect might pull out a gun. Other times, he simply might be reaching for his wallet.

Perry Harris, a training manager for Advanced Interactive Systems, which developed the technology, said the company has offices in England and Singapore, as well as in the United States.

Harris, from North Carolina, said Advanced Interactive Systems has sold hundreds of shooting simulators all over the world. Customers include local police and sheriff's departments, the Canadian Air Force and the U.S. Navy SEALs.

The company even has a version of the software that uses live ammunition fired at a self-sealing screen. Harris said using real bullets saves police departments from buying the special infrared guns and lets officers use weapons they're already familiar with -- and the real guns recoil when fired, unlike the infrared devices.

Rutherford hopes to start training the rest of the sheriff's department within the next few weeks, but Harris said the seven deputies assigned to teach their fellow officers need to standardize their training plans.

"Anyone can operate the software and shoot," Harris said. He said the trick is for all the instructors to teach the same responses and teach the same reasoning.

Reach Rusty Marks at rustymarks@wvgazette.com or 304-348-1215. To see more of The Charleston Gazette, or to subscribe to the newspaper, go to <http://www.wvgazette.com>. Copyright (c) 2009, The Charleston Gazette, W. Va.

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