

Aiming to understand the danger police officers face

By: LAURIE MASON Bucks County Courier Times

The first time I was killed, it wasn't with a bullet, but with a wrench.

I had pulled my gun out of its holster when the angry man started walking toward me, but kept my finger off the trigger. He wasn't armed, right? Surely I shouldn't shoot.

He was yelling something. Coming toward me, faster now. Swinging the wrench. Drop it, I ordered him. Drop it! He ignored me.

Shoot? Don't shoot? It was decision time.

And in the seconds it took me to make up my mind, he brought the heavy tool down on my head. Everything got dark.

Since February, Bucks County police officers have fatally shot three people. None was wielding a gun, but allegedly threatened the officers with a shard of glass, a knife and a brick, respectively.

The glass shard incident involved a Bristol Township man who reportedly lunged at two cops and a probation officer inside his cluttered apartment in February. After an investigation, District Attorney Michelle Henry ruled the officer was justified in using deadly force.

The two most recent fatalities remain under investigation, and raise more questions:

On April 9, a Bristol police officer shot and killed a 69-year-old man who police officers said was brandishing a chef's knife as they tried to remove him from his car after a minor traffic accident. The man's family claims he was partially paralyzed from a stroke and wasn't strong enough to threaten police.

Last weekend, 21-year-old Tommy Lovett, a man with a history of learning disabilities and violent outbursts, was shot by a Middletown police officer in a wooded area outside the Oxford Valley Mall.

Witnesses said Lovett, of Middletown, attacked a 17-year-old girl in the mall parking lot and tried to gouge her eyes out with his fingers.

Police officers said he had picked up a brick and threatened them with it when they tried to arrest him.

County detectives still are gathering information about both shootings, so prosecutors are not saying much about them now.

But many in the community have asked why police used guns to stop the men, instead of subduing them in a less deadly manner. Or why couldn't they just shoot the attackers in the leg?

"We are trained to shoot to incapacitate," said Sgt. Richard Vona, a Warwick police officer and training coordinator at the county's Police Training Center in Warrington.

"How many times are we taught to fire? Enough to incapacitate."

Vona is a firearms instructor, one who trains local police officers in the county's AIS PRISim simulator, a room-sized, laserguided interactive video and computer system that the county purchased with a \$95,000 Homeland Security grant two years ago.

The simulator has a decisionmaking mode, which presents officers with real-life scenarios such as a violent domestic assault call, an armed man inside a school, or a despondent person intent on committing suicide.

As a reporter aiming to understand the shootings better, I spent a recent morning in the simulator.

I did well in the practice part of the test, landing almost all of my shots in or close to the bull's eyes on the head- and torsoshaped targets. The Glock 17, a common police-issued weapon (mine fired a laser, not bullets) felt solidly comfortable in my hand.

As a fan of zombie-killing video games, I was fairly confident about my shooting ability.

The training center provided me with a bulky bulletproof vest and safety goggles. I'd been warned that the gumball-sized plastic pellets used to simulate return fire could sting, so I'd layered on the clothes for the assignment.

During the first scenario, I played the part of a police officer sent to investigate reports of a belligerent man threatening others. With the question of whether police should shoot a person who doesn't have a gun in mind, I hesitated as he hoisted a large pipe wrench and came at me.

He lunged. The screen went dark.

"I'm dead, aren't I?"

Vona confirmed that I was.

I drew my gun quicker during the next few scenarios, but still managed to fail. After being confronted with a man who came around the corner of a schoolroom with a shotgun, I shot so wildly that the lines and circles that showed where my bullets landed after the scene was over looked like a child's follow-the-dots game drawn over the screen.

In one scene, a seemingly drugged-out man kept reaching into an open desk drawer. Gun drawn, I found myself trembling as he taunted me and moved his hands in and out of the desk. I didn't shoot him when he pulled out a pair of scissors and stabbed at the air, but it was a close call.

I was killed quickly by a man who committed suicide inside a gym. When he pointed the gun at his own head I relaxed for some reason. I don't think I was even aiming at him in the second that it took him to twist his wrist, shoot me, then take his own life.

Sometimes, I did shoot when I was supposed to. But when my bullets didn't land where they needed to, the attackers kept coming, and I went down.

This is the reason police officers are trained to aim at bodily mass, usually the torso, Vona explained. The time it might take a cop to put a bullet in an attacker's leg could be a fatal delay.

One of the most intense sessions involved a traffic stop on a dark road. I tried to train my weapon on the male driver, who got out of the car screaming profanities and waving a handgun. But I was distracted by the sound of a female passenger shouting inside the car. I feared she'd jump out with a gun too.

I did kill that gunman, but I also sprayed the woods behind him with bullets. Had anyone been there, they could have been shot, too.

I couldn't believe how fast the bad guys moved in the scenes.

"That's how these things happen. It's instantaneous," said Harry McCann, the county's Director of Law Enforcement Training. "What you see in the movies is not real life."

After a fatal police shooting, the officer involved is put on desk duty until the district attorney determines whether the shooting was legal.

According to the law, the use of deadly force is justified if the officer believes such force is needed to protect himself from serious bodily injury.

Juries considering deadly force as self-defense must be convinced that the defendant reasonably believed he was in imminent danger of death or serious bodily injury before they acquit. The statute says a person must make an effort to retreat from danger before they resort to deadly force.

Police officers, however, aren't held to that standard. The law states they are "not obliged to desist from their efforts to make an arrest" before shooting someone.

In other words, the law does not require police officers try to escape from the person's attack before opening fire.

County detectives investigate all police-involved shootings in Bucks County. Henry said this process is given priority.

"Obviously, the most important thing is a complete and thorough investigation, but we do try to resolve these matters as quickly as possible," she said.

It's difficult to say how Bucks County's police compare to other community's in the use of deadly force. Although the U.S. Dept. of Justice's Bureau of Justice Statistics keeps count of how many police officers are killed or assaulted in the line of duty, their Web site offers no information about how many civilians are killed in clashes with police.

Tod Burke is a professor of criminal justice at Virginia's Radford University, and a former Maryland police officer. He said there's no evidence cops are using deadly force more often in reaction to the many cop killings in the news.

"Police officers are made aware of other jurisdictional shooting via daily briefings. Of course, this serves as a very real reminder just how dangerous a police officer's job is and the necessity for proper officer safety techniques," Burke said.

Police officers are constantly reminded they can't be lulled into a false sense of security, believing, for example, that since they've worked for years with being shot at, it will never happen to them, he said.

This is known as "Tombstone Courage" or the "John Wayne Syndrome," Burke said.

The professor said Bucks County is doing the right thing by offering its law enforcement officers high-tech training.

"Deadly force remains a last resort, not the first in a police officer's arsenal of responses to a crisis," he said. "If officers are reacting to the upswing in violence, it is serving as a reminder about the need for officer safety and community needs."

I emerged after my hour in the simulator with sweaty palms and a queasy stomach. Although I hadn't expected to do as well as a trained law enforcement officer, I was humbled by how many potentially fatal mistakes I'd made.

The state requires all police officers to complete two full days of training each year. Using the simulator isn't mandatory, but most departments take advantage of it, McCann said.

More than 3,000 law enforcement officers from five counties pass through the training center each year, participating in the 103 programs the facility offers. In the main hall of the center, there's a large memorial to the 11 Bucks officers who've been killed in the line of duty.

This "Roll Call of Heroes," is engraved with officers' names and dates of death. Each fallen officer's hat and uniform patch is displayed on a shelf above a plaque.

The memorial recently was updated to commemorate the death of Christopher Jones, a Middletown police officer killed during a traffic stop in January.

McCann said the memorial is located at the training center for a reason.

"This is a reminder of what can happen, every time a police officer answers a call."

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