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Life-or-death decisions
New simulator provides police with valuable training

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A rookie cop was put in a situation Tuesday afternoon that no good cop ever hopes to find himself in.

The new recruit, Heath Williams, joined the Nacogdoches Police Department on Monday, and the very next day he was responding to a report of a suspicious looking white male in his 50s who was trying to break into a business in downtown Nacogdoches. Williams was forced to use deadly force and put the armed suspect down.

Before shots were fired, the officer ordered the man to disarm, shouting at him, "Sir drop the knife, drop the knife, sir! Sir, put the knife down or I will shoot!" Two shots rang out and the suspect laid motionless in a puddle of water.

But no shots were actually fired from a gun Tuesday in downtown Nacogdoches, and no suspects were killed.

Rather, this was just one of hundreds of scenarios officers are using to hone split-second judgment skills with a new \$38,500 computer simulator that the department bought with stimulus funds.

NPD has been training its new and veteran officers on a similar simulator for about 10 years until it became obsolete and could no longer be repaired or updated. That left the department without the critical training tool for a couple of years until this summer, when their new system arrived.

The purpose of these scenario simulators is to give officers a chance to experience out-of-control situations in a controlled environment.

"It's all about decision making," simulator instructor Sgt. Brett Maisel said. "We can train them on the safe and effective use of firearms at the range. But what the added bonus of having this technology offers is that we can put them in situations where they have to make life-or-death decisions in a split second, and then we go over those decisions afterwards."

Instructor and trainees communicate with each other as they would over the radio, calling for back up and informing dispatchers of the situation at the scene of the crime. Officers can also shoot at computer-generated targets and old-fashioned shooting gallery targets. Each interactive scenario, which can include situations like domestic violence and robberies, has multiple endings to keep police officers guessing and their wits sharp, Maisel said.

After the virtual suspect was hit Tuesday square in the chest with a laser gun that is almost identical in shape and

size to the real sidearms officers routinely carry, Maisel and Williams went over what just happened. In a real-world scenario, the wound would have more than likely been a fatal hit, and while the computer system tracks response times and the accuracy of shots fired, it is the human instructor who discerns whether the officer's actions were justified. In this case, they were. Williams said the moment he decided to shoot came when the man went from holding the knife down low to up over his head as if he was going to stab him.

"You never want to take someone's life, and I certainly wish he had made the decision to put the knife down. But in that situation, I had to use deadly force. It was clear the guy was coming at me with a knife," Williams said.

Maisel told his trainee that he used strong verbal commands as he should have and did a good job of moving around the room to find cover from the potentially dangerous man on the screen. He said Williams correctly did not open fire until the man prepared to lunge forward with the weapon.

Another tense scenario played out afterward.

Williams was now responding to a home where the security alarm had been activated. Upon entering the home's dark kitchen and spotting a man holding a flashlight and a butcher knife, the shouting began again.

"Sir, back away and put the knife down!" Williams said.

The man on the screen, who may or may not have been the owner of the home, seemed confused. Despite holding a knife in his hands, he seemed to be non-threatening, and Williams chose to not open fire, leaving time for the man to place the knife on the counter top without incident. This was a best-case scenario, and Williams kept a cool head and no one was hurt, virtually.

"He put the knife down and backed up," Maisel said in his evaluation. "He made the right decision. But had this guy continued to approach the officer or threaten the officer in any way, then he might have had to make the decision to use deadly force.

"That's why this kind of training is so important," Maisel said.
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