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Simulator lets police train for confrontations

Mar 15, 2011 (The Modesto Bee - McClatchy-Tribune Information Services via COMTEX) -- Modesto police Sgt. Brian Findlen was confronted with a suicidal man waving a handgun inside a downtown office.

With his sidearm drawn, Findlen repeatedly told the man to drop the gun, but his commands fell on deaf ears. It wasn't until the office worker looked directly at Findlen that the officer's presence seemed to register. Then the man raised his weapon toward Findlen.

Findlen opened fire, shooting five times, and the armed man fell to the ground -- end of simulation. Findlen's real ammunition had been replaced with "Airmunition," and the man was not flesh and blood, but a 2-D image in a Force Options Simulator.

The scenario, however, is real, and one of many potentially life-threatening situations officers face on the job.

"I want to give him as much latitude as I can, but I want to go home at the end of the day," Findlen told trainer and Modesto police Detective Terry Seese at the end of the virtual scenario.

The simulator -- paid for by a grant from the Commission on Peace Officer Standards and Training -- is just one tool the department uses to train officers to react when encountering those split-second decisions.

Officers undergo a four-hour training session every two years in which they study case law related to use of force and participate in a variety of potentially lethal scenarios.

Under Penal Code section 835a, an officer can use force on a suspect to "effect the arrest, to prevent escape or to overcome resistance." "In our line of work, we may do everything right, but things still go bad," Seese said.

He emphasized that no amount of training can completely prepare an officer for every real-life confrontation, and no two situations are the same.

"I can't unarrest you because I'm scared," he said. "I'm not deemed the aggressor if I used reasonable force. I don't have to back down." He said in those high-intensity, high-adrenaline situations, it's easy for even veteran officers to get "tunnel vision." An officer has a variety of tools at his or her disposal, but there is no policy that dictates which weapon is best suited for a particular situation.

"What unfolds before you, you have to react to," he said. "There is no situation in which you would use the same option every time." On Monday, Modesto police invited members of the media to take part in the simulated training.

Bee reporters were equipped with pepper spray, a Taser and a gun, which use lasers to interact with a video. Reporters were given a briefing similar to the information a dispatcher would relay to an officer. The simulator starts when the officer arrives on scene.

The scenarios varied from a disgruntled post office employee laid off after 15 years of service to a man using a knife to hold a woman hostage.

After each scenario, Seese questioned the participants about their experience, specifically, "What did you see? What did you do and why?" He said there is no right or wrong answer because every situation varies.

A suspect could be mentally disturbed, under the influence of alcohol or drugs, or severely agitated.

No amount of verbal commands will positively influence every situation, he said.

"Action is always faster than reaction; we are reactive to what suspects do," Seese said.

With 14 years in law enforcement, Findlen said the simulator is the most realistic training available to officers in a controlled setting.

"Even though it is a controlled environment," he said, "it does bring previous training in, and it gets the adrenaline running." Findlen said many things go through an officer's mind when responding to a call in which the suspect has a weapon.

But at the forefront is, "making sure that we go home at the end of the night, making sure our partners go home at the end of the night and making sure no innocent people are hurt." To see more of The Modesto Bee, or to subscribe to the newspaper, go to <http://www.modbee.com>. Copyright (c) 2011, The Modesto Bee, Calif. Distributed by McClatchy-Tribune Information Services. For more

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