

Survival Tactics—Reactive Shooting Situations (STRESS)

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Abstract: Survival is a key word to any law enforcement officer. Law enforcement officers deal with people from all walks of life, including some individuals who do not always conform to normal behavior. Survival Tactics—Reactive Shooting Situations (STRESS), or “red handle” training as it is commonly called, will better prepare the officers to meet situations where their lives may be in danger. Red-handle training teaches how to react to and survive a real shooting situation.

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The course, Survival Tactics—Reactive Shooting Situations (STRESS), also known as “red handle” training, is designed to show law enforcement officers how to react to and survive a real shooting situation. Several conservation officers throughout the United States have been shot or shot at during the past few years. Conservation officers wearing uniforms and badges appear no different to a violator than any other law enforcement officer. Conservation officers have been accustomed to dealing almost exclusively with hunters and fishermen. But today, drug dealers are found in public use areas, marijuana is grown in wilderness areas, and violent crimes are committed in many areas that were relatively free of such activities a few years ago. All conservation officers hope to live to retirement, but to do that they must learn to survive.

The “red handle” training program was developed by Lt. Robert Welch of the Ohio State Police. Several other states received instructor’s training in the program since then. In Missouri, the State Highway Patrol initiated the program and all of its officers are now trained quarterly.

When the Missouri Department of Conservation was invited to review this training program in the fall of 1983, Protection Division Chief Robert King assigned Assistant Chief John Frye to evaluate the patrol training for possible addition to the in-service training program. When Frye participated in the program, he was impressed with the realism and training potential and recommended it for the officers in the field.

Beginning in the spring of 1984, 9 regional staff specialists were taken through the instructor course by the Missouri Highway Patrol. By mid-summer all conservation agents in Missouri had completed the course. This is now an annual in-service program, and second year training was completed during the past summer.

The classroom work consists of background information on factual shooting situations from law enforcement reports. A slide series covering this information helps retention of the important facts.

Preparation is the key to survival. Under stress, an officer's training is his best tool for staying alive. For some officers, the last time a gun was actually pointed at them was when they were kids playing cowboys and Indians and someone said, "Bang, bang you're dead." That's not proper training.

In red-handle training, someone will point and fire a gun at the officer, and if shot accurately, he will be hit with a cotton wad projectile. This is very realistic and safe when all precautions are followed.

Lag time, the time between when one sees danger and when he reacts in some manner, is dangerous. The reduction in lag time and elimination of the tendency to do nothing is the main objective of the red handle program.

Be alert; have a plan; and react. If these 3 basic things can be instilled in the officer as he approaches a situation, he will have a better chance of surviving whatever happens.

The firearms used by the arresting officer in the red-handle training should be .38-caliber revolvers of the same model and type that are carried on duty. The assailants should use small frame .38-caliber revolvers that are easily concealed on their persons. A 12-gauge shotgun rendered incapable of firing also is recommended.

The stocks of the shotguns are painted red as are the grips on all revolvers used. This red indicates that this particular firearm is incapable of chambering any commercial live ammunition that has been manufactured.

The "Speer" brand red plastic cases are loaded with cotton wadding for projectiles. The only propellant used is a large pistol primer. Safety glasses are worn while loading the training ammunition. Students load their own cotton ball cartridges under supervision. Issued soft body armor also is mandatory along with safety glasses during the actual scenarios.

The cost for equipment is not great when the possibility of preventing an injury or fatality among officers is considered.

A portable video recorder and playback system enhances the training by allowing the officers to critique themselves and study their reactions shortly after going through the scenario. Critique sheets are used by the evaluator to record the reactions or lack of reactions of the officers as they go through the different scenarios.

To present the program properly, 5 to 6 people are needed. The safety officer/evaluator position can be handled by 1 person. Two or 3 trained officers play the part of the assailants and 1 person should handle the video recording, if such equipment is available. Since this is a safety program, an agency should not shortcut the required manpower and end up with a half-safe program.

Prior to beginning the scenarios, all other guns, knives, ammunition, and speed loaders are removed from all persons at the training site. These should be locked in a room or car trunk that is not being used during the training.

No other weapons or ammunition except the red-handle equipment should be at the training site. Physical contact between arresting officers and assailants should not involve any action that could cause injury. Firearms should not be discharged at the head or face, and at all times, should be fired at least 12 inches from the body. If vehicles are used they should be pre-positioned for the exercise. Also all vehicles used should be checked for guns and night sticks and these objects should be removed.

This training is so realistic officers actually have made radio calls for backup and have attempted to find other weapons and ammunition in the vehicles. Outside spectators are not allowed to view these training exercises due to the realism and seriousness of the training.

In setting up the scenarios, objectives and instructional goals should be kept in mind. The training should be as realistic as possible. The design of the scenario can be similar to an incident that may have happened to officers of the participating agency while they were on duty.

Missouri scenarios have included hunting camp contacts, misdemeanor and felony vehicle stops, and paramilitary contacts. The arresting officer should be in full uniform, preferably an old one. The assailants should wear loose clothing that can conceal guns easily. The safety officer shall check and load the guns before each officer's exercise.

As each officer completes the exercise, the critique sheet is filled out and the evaluator discusses the exercise with the officer. After the officer has completed that particular scenario he may watch the rest of the officers go through the same scenario. No officer may see the scenario or have information about it prior to his own exercise.

This is a shooting experience. Physical contact is not necessary and simulation of hand cuffing may be used to expedite the scenario and keep personal contact to a minimum.