

Officer Survival Training Within Florida's Game and Fresh Water Fish Commission

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Abstract: Officer survival training begins with the basic firearms course which is taught to all newly hired wildlife officers. The course consists of the fundamentals of shooting a revolver and shotgun. However, we take the course a step further and stress the importance of mental conditioning as it relates to surviving a gun battle. Our advanced firearms program relentlessly drills in the idea of mental conditioning. The training philosophy is "repetition leads to instinctive shooting." Repetitive drills in all aspects of firearms use are performed. The experience and the ability to shoot instinctively become all too important during the many field scenarios that we set up for our recruits. With the use of training aids, such as the fiber optic laser vests, we are able to set up and execute realistic shoot/don't shoot situations. We further prepare our wildlife officers to become and maintain themselves as survivors through our physical fitness program. The program is voluntary for incumbent officers and mandatory for new ones. In order to prepare our officers for other types of emergencies, we administer awareness programs dealing with crack cocaine and the AIDS problem. Our officers are also taught basic baton use and are each issued PR-24 police batons.

Proc. Annu. Conf. Southeast. Assoc. Fish and Wildl. Agencies 43:507-514

The Florida Game and Fresh Water Fish Commission's training staff strives at producing knowledgeable and productive officers. The term "survive" has become a part of every lesson we teach our people. We have the confidence and pride that the graduates from our Academy are the best prepared police officers in the state—perhaps in the country.

Our survival training does not end at the Academy, but continues throughout the officer's career. Mental conditioning and the philosophies of a survivor are drilled in at every appropriate opportunity. Progressive thinking is our vehicle, and surviving adverse conditions is our goal.

Basic Firearms Training

Our basic firearms course is taught to all wildlife officer recruits at our Academy and is routinely refreshed in the field. The program centers around 2 concepts—mental conditioning and mechanical skills instruction.

We instill into our officers the importance of mental conditioning throughout their training and it is during our basic firearms course that they first realize the significance of it.

The course begins with teaching recruits the basics of firearms use. This includes ammunition use, safety precautions, firearm nomenclature, cleaning weapons, proper draw of handgun, holstering, proper positions, grip, sight alignment, trigger control, loading, and unloading.

Throughout the lectures we emphasize to the students that their mind plays the biggest role in their success in the firearms program. We build their confidence but do not tolerate mental errors. We show them that firing a seventh time with their now unloaded revolver could cost them their life. They must have complete control despite the stress involved. They must know how and when to reload and how to use whatever cover is available. And most importantly, they must feel confident that they can hit their target with their weapon when it becomes necessary.

We equip our officers with a holster especially designed for us by Safariland. This holster is extremely safe in that it has 2 safety snaps, and even when the weapon is unsnapped, a violator would have a reasonably hard time taking the weapon from an officer because of its design. However, it is quicker on the draw than most police-type holsters. The officers spend much time learning its proper use, and many of the sequences that we shoot offer repetition in the holstering/unholstering process.

One of our basic defensive positions is called the low-ready position. In this stance the officer is aiming a few feet in front of his target yet he has all the basics in a “ready” mode. He has proper grip and sight alignment. From this position all the officer has to do is raise his arms and fire. We teach our officers to use this position on 2 different occasions—when readying himself for a possible gunfight or to de-escalate after firing his weapon and his target is down.

Our current basic qualification course consists of 7 shooting sequences which use multiple targets and are from varying distances. We run a hot line and an officer is expected to have a loaded weapon at all times and to never holster an empty gun. All the firing sequences end with the officer shooting his last shot, unloading, loading, covering his target, and then the shooter waits for the rangemaster to give the command to holster. This last step has recently been introduced into our program and is well received because we are now conditioning the officer to end his shooting sequence (gunfight) with evidence that it is over, instead of after shooting 6 or 12 rounds, whichever the case may be.

Our basic shotgun course parallels the above. We, again, run a hot line and use the low ready position. Officers are also taught how to load from this low ready position. We shoot birdshot, buckshot, and slugs in our training and show the officers the versatility of the shotgun by using different ammunition.

Advanced Firearms Training

Much of our advanced firearms training is designed to solidify the officer's confidence and mentally prepare him for a deadly confrontation. We have 3 golden rules which apply to those confrontations when justification is present. The rules are—there are no second place winners, there are no rules, and cheat whenever possible. The logic behind these statements is that the officer is conditioned to win, never give up, and to take advantage of every possible tactical and environmental edge that is available.

Our firearms qualification courses, attended by officers semi-annually, are scored not only by the number of hits of the target but also by time, use of cover, and use of verbal commands. These courses differ each time so that the officers do not know what to expect. Most of these courses are designed to increase officer stress level to produce adrenalin surges, tension in muscles, increased heart rate and circulation, and coordination changes. This has shown us that during high-stress scenarios, judgement and creativity is limited and that we revert to our training to overcome the situation.

In 1986, we exposed all of our officers to the Firearms Training Systems (FATS) machine. This computerized shooting aid has dozens of shoot/don't shoot scenarios and gives the officer a chance to experience a deadly confrontation. The machine scores the officer on his judgement, time, and shooting ability. The system has a lazer/video component which allows the officers to see exactly when they fired their shots and where their hits were. The ability of the machine to give immediate feedback on the officer's performance is extremely helpful in a recruit's training.

During this training most, if not all, of our officers experience stress during shooting sequences. The training proved beneficial as an awareness to the importance of mental and skill-level conditioning, and the role stress plays in these situations.

During the past 2 years, 2 professional tactical firearms advisors have given our training staff their program of instruction. In 1987, Bill Rogers, from Jacksonville, Florida, put us through a 32-hour course. He taught us the importance of repetitive shooting and loading and holstering exercises. We shot exclusively on steel targets shaped as either head plates or silhouettes. These targets were both moving and stationary. Also, we shot over 1,000 rounds during the 4-day session where we were introduced to the modified Weaver stance.

That same year we ran a qualification course which introduced many of Rogers' philosophies and techniques. The modified Weaver stance is used by most of our officers and they all enjoy shooting at steel targets. These targets allow the officer to immediately know whether they have hit the target, as it would be in reality.

Two head-plate machines, each having 6 plates, were erected side by side. Officers were then paired up and competed to see who could knock down the 6 plates the fastest. The competition was done as an elimination process, with only 1 winner remaining. The sensation of the competition, along with having many onlookers, provided the stress that we had planned for. The results for a few officers were real eye-openers. Some of our best shooters were unable to knock down the 6 plates

with the 18 rounds they carry on duty. Their heart would race and their knuckles turned white due to the tension in their hands. During 1 training session, we hooked up officers to a heart-rate monitor and found that some of the officers' heart rates were over 180 beats per minute even before the competition began. From this exercise we were able to have a captive audience, not so much because the officers were required to be in attendance, but because they were reinforced to the importance of mental conditioning on their shooting skills.

During the Rogers' course we were also given instructions specifically for the shotgun. The same philosophies that applied to the revolver were reiterated. We shot 200 rounds of buckshot and slugs, and became thoroughly familiar with the weapon. One important activity that we experienced was the combat loading exercise. This technique allows the officer to load his weapon with one hand, while the other is holding the weapon on the shoulder, ready to fire if necessary. This is the only type of loading that we teach to our officers since they carry the shotgun in their vehicle with the magazine loaded. If the need to reload arises it is because they are in a combat condition and we want them to have control of the situation; having the shotgun in a ready-to-fire position at all times helps.

Since the Rogers' course, we have included the shotgun, along with the revolver, in most of our firearms qualification courses. This not only gives the officers a chance to shoot their weapons, but allows us to inspect each gun to ensure that it is functional.

In 1988, Clint Smith, from International Training Consultants in Indiana, presented advanced firearms training to our training staff. Many of the techniques Smith taught we had already implemented, but he did introduce us to some new ones. This is what we wanted and have learned to expect from bringing in outside professional help—new ideas to give us an edge.

Our 1989 Spring Firearms training is based on many of Smith's philosophies. The training begins with a new concept for our officers—3 zones on targets to be aware of and be able to hit. Zone "A" is the standard center of mass portion of the target; i.e., midway between the bottom of the neck and the naval. It has been shown time and time again that it is possible for an assailant to receive multiple hits in the "A" zone and still continue with the gunfight for several minutes. At times this can be attributed to the use of some drugs or, as in the infamous 1987 FBI shooting in Miami, because of the assailant's determination to fight and his unwillingness to give up. Although we teach that this is the preferred point of aim, we offer the officer alternatives if this fails to stop the criminal.

Zone "B" is located from the eyes to the top of the head. This area terminates the "computer" housing of the body and ceases all subsequent activity. This zone is offered to our officers if hits in zone "A" fail to end the gun battle. With the increasing use of body armor among criminals, zone "A" can become a serious tunnel vision type death trap. The officers practice a 2-shot drill into zone "A" followed by a single shot into zone "B" upon command. We emphasize that this zone is a difficult target to hit, especially on a moving subject.

The degree of difficulty in hitting zone "B" has been the key reason to offer

the officers another alternative. Zone "C" is located from the naval to the crotch and a hit here will undoubtedly immobilize an assailant. This area is offered because of the large bones found in the pelvis region. The zone is relatively large and easily hit, but the officer is taught to carefully survey the scene after shooting his assailant in this area. Because it is not necessarily a vital hit, the impact will most assuredly give our officers an edge to win the gunfight.

As in most of our qualifications, officers are expected to use cover and verbalization to gain an edge and buy additional time. We also teach officers the proper way to advance or retreat from the aggressor by using shuffle steps.

The course duplicates everything for the shotgun, and its versatility is again emphasized. The shotguns are patterned with the use of buckshot. From close range the officer is taught how to subdue an assailant, that is holding a hostage, with the use of buckshot.

All of our advanced training is built upon repetition, basic firearm skills, and the officer's mental conditioning. The training is 3-tiered; i.e., the basics, advanced skills and techniques, and then the opportunity to feel and react in a more "realistic" situation.

Field Scenarios

The use of field scenarios has been implemented by many agencies in their training. After the basics in patrol procedure, firearms use, and defensive tactics have been discussed and mastered by our recruits, we expose them to a barrage of scenarios which helps to tie everything together. This also increases the officer stress level during his training.

During all of the scenarios the officer is expected to act as he would in a real situation. He is to be courteous or aggressive, whatever the condition calls for. He is expected to de-escalate the encounter as much as possible. We emphasize that while on duty there is no routine activity, anyone could turn into an aggressor and that the officer must be ready to switch from the passive wildlife officer to a survivor in a split second.

The officer must use all of his available equipment in a proper fashion. This includes the vehicle and its location relative to the aggressor, radio, siren, lights, cover, weapon, etc. Weapons used in the scenarios are painted red and are incapable of firing.

One of the problems associated with being a wildlife officer, is that many of those we deal with are armed. This is a potentially dangerous situation for the officer. We, however, turn it around in the officer's mind and convince him that it is an advantage in that we "know" the potential aggressor is armed, thus eliminating the element of surprise. This helps to convince our officers that there is no reason to consider any contact routine.

One of the most useful tools that we utilize is a fiber optic target detection system (laser vests). This tool uses both simulated revolvers and shotguns. This detection system aids us in determining whether the officer is reverting back to his

basics when he is faced with a shoot situation or if he is simply "spraying and praying" as the phrase goes. The laser vests detects accurate shots up to 50 yards.

We use 2 different scenarios which are aided by the vests and teach the recruits some fundamental skills when approaching a high risk situation. One of the scenarios is a disabled vehicle which matches the description of one used in an armed robbery. Two persons are outside the vehicle fixing a flat tire when the patrol car approaches. The officer is expected to utilize his equipment, and the "felons" do not react to the presence of the officer until they detect that the officer is on to them. This occurs either when the officer verbalizes his intentions, his radio is loud enough for the felons to hear, blue light is turned on, etc. When this occurs 1 felon flees into the wooded area adjacent to the road and sneaks back around the officer, while the other felon engages the officer in a gunfight.

The vests indicate whether the recruit is able to hit his assailant before he is hit. The recruit occasionally undergoes a tunnel vision effect and concentrates 100% on the assailant next to the vehicle, and forgets the other felon who usually ends up shooting the officer.

The other "violent" scenario is a felony-stop on a windowless van (an officer's nightmare). The officer is expected to call for backup, but is advised none will come and he must subdue the wanted persons alone. Two assailants come out of the vehicle upon the officer's orders and are easily taken, depending on the officer's procedure. However, a third felon awaits in the van unknown to the officer. This third person is the officer's real test in survival and the outcome depends on his way of dealing with this situation.

Along with the laser vests we also utilize a VCR camera to capture the scenarios. The officer is critiqued immediately following the exercise by the instructor on an individual basis, and then later in a group atmosphere using the video. Much is gained by the use of the tapes, and it helps to de-escalate the tension among the recruits, because of the occasional humorous scenes that we watch together.

We use these felony-type scenarios sparingly, however, and most of the field exercises involve either minor or no violations. This tends to minimize the anticipation of a physical confrontation, yet emphasizes the importance of readiness for a deadly encounter. The scenarios also demonstrate to the officers the demand that a confrontation puts on their body. For this reason our officers are expected to maintain physical fitness.

Physical Fitness

Being physically fit is important to all people, regardless of occupation, and it is especially important for the police officer. We show our recruits that being fit gives them an edge when confronting a physical situation. This is emphasized by the fact that the last 2 wildlife officers killed in the line of duty were first involved in a struggle or a fight with the assailant before they were shot.

Our physical fitness program begins at the recruit level and extends throughout the officer's career. We start by discussing wellness and health risks, emphasizing

that there are 7 good health habits they should follow: no smoking, frequent exercise, 7 to 8 hours of sleep nightly, staying close to ideal weight, regularly eating breakfast, drinking little or no alcohol, and not eating snacks between meals. We then discuss in-depth exercise, nutrition, diets, stress management, smoking cessation, alcohol and drugs, and family fitness.

After several hours of discussing the above, the officers are then individually screened to determine their current status. We screen each person as to his health or medical problems and determine health risks, if present, and to what degree. We then conduct assessments in physical fitness, exercise, and nutrition. Each recruit then defines his fitness goals.

From here we develop a fitness program designed for the individual. The program includes an exercise prescription, safety precautions, injury prevention, and a nutritional prescription. Officers, since 1986, have been under contract to maintain minimum levels of fitness. This is checked semi-annually by conducting physical fitness assessments to all of our officers. Although the employees hired before 1986 are not required to maintain the minimal levels of fitness, they are required to participate in the assessments and to voluntarily maintain physical fitness.

The semi-annual assessments include the following activities: blood pressure check, weight lifting (one-time maximum bench press), sit-ups, flexibility test, and a 2.4-km run or 4.8-km walk. Each officer is given an assessment form which they keep and are able to use in comparing their performance, with posted norms for each exercise.

The program has proved to be beneficial and well received among the troops. Exposing and reminding the officers about their physical condition, regularly, is helping to combat the relatively sedentary work that we do.

Miscellaneous Survival Training

The training staff is constantly emphasizing survival to officers in all phases of training. All of our recruits participate in the widely popular Rapid, Intense, Specific, Competencies (RISC) Management System of defensive tactics designed by and used throughout the country.

All officers are issued a PR-24 police baton. They receive a 12-hour certification course and a 6-hour refresher course on a yearly basis on the use of the PR-24. The batons are also used in some field training scenarios. When training with the baton the officers are exposed to more than the required basics. One exercise we have adopted in our sessions is a 45-second adrenalin-surge drill. The officer is armed with a flexible practice baton and must fight off 2 assailants, who attack him relentlessly with crash bags, for the duration of the drill. Without exception, all the officers have experienced the energy drain on their body when experiencing a hostile and violent situation.

The staff is progressive in nature and is always hungry for new information which increases officer survival. Recently, we have exposed our officers to 2 new awareness programs dealing with the ever increasing activity with crack cocaine and

the dangers involved when handling people who use or deal this drug. The tape suggests ways to handle the situations and ways to detect users and pushers. The other tape is an awareness program on AIDS. The officers are given ideas into handling situations in a way to minimize their exposure to the deadly disease.

This tape suggests some equipment that the officer should have to help him deal with this potential hazard. The most important of these materials are now found in all of our patrol vehicles—vinyl gloves to protect our men when human body fluids are exposed.

We do everything we can to better protect our officers both on and off duty. They are a valuable asset, as well as decent human beings, which should have as many possible ideas, skills, and materials available to them in order to survive the potential dangers they find when protecting our neighbors and our wildlife.