

Officer Involved Shooting – One Officer’s Response

by Sgt. Michael R. Soden

Abstract:

This article addresses the importance of officer-involved shooting post-care. Police officers involved in deadly force encounters will have different responses, but the process of return to normalcy can begin once the officer speaks with someone. This person can be a mental health professional, a co-worker, spouse, or good friend. The important thing is to be able to verbalize the experience and not internalize it and keep it buried.

Keywords: *Police shooting*
Police-involved Shooting
Police—Job stress
Stress management
Post-traumatic stress disorder

Sometimes, firing at another human being is the only way for a police officer to protect his life or that of a partner or citizen. After using deadly force, the initial adrenaline rush subsides, the officer secures the scene, and realizes he is safe. But then what?

On Nov. 6, 2006, I and two other officers – good friends – responded to a home invasion robbery call. Our response time was less than 90 seconds. We made a quick plan of action and set up our perimeter, much like we have done many times before. The difference this time was that three bad guys came out shooting instead of giving up. They didn’t hesitate and showed no respect for the law or human life. Police officers spend countless hours training, both at the academy and during in-service courses, learning to act in stressful life or death situations and to control our emotions. We didn’t have time to do anything other than what we had trained to do.

We were all on autopilot. Auditory exclusion, time slowing down and speeding up, distance distortion – they all occurred over the ten seconds of sustained gunfire among six individuals. Some 50 rounds were fired by the time the confrontation ended. No officers were struck. One suspect lay dead, another was struck and apprehended, and a third was hit but managed to get away and still remains at large.

We headed back to headquarters to meet with the Fraternal Order of Police attorney, Internal Affairs, the chief, and whoever else wandered by to say “good job...” My training over the years prepared me for this. All of the simunitions and firearms judgment practice paid off. All three of us were okay; we had killed one bad guy and caught another one. Then at headquarters, we were given an Advice of Rights form by the Internal Affairs investigator, the same form we give to suspects. All of my training hadn’t prepared me for what was yet to come.

I began work that evening at 1900 hours. The ordeal began at 0130 hours, and I arrived home at 1000 hours the next morning. I should have been exhausted but was instead wired and ready to go. My adrenaline dump was still going strong and continued for 72 hours before I crashed and was finally able to sleep. Within those 72 hours, I watched my incident play on the news countless times – and let's not forget about seeing my name in the newspaper. There were hundreds of concerned phone calls that usually included the “what was it like?” question, which forced me to relive the experience. I also had to call my family and explain to them what I had just been involved in – not as easy as you might think. “Morning mom and dad. How are you doing this morning? Me? Well, I got into a gun battle last night and we killed a guy.” Now I have hysterical parents asking me a million questions.

The next thing I have to contend with is departmental policy that requires me to re-qualify with my firearm, go through judgment enhancement scenarios, and visit psychological services, all within a ten day period. None of that was a big deal, but I felt like I had no time to decompress. After completing all that, I was placed on administrative duty and relegated to sorting tickets and data entry. No one asked me what I might like to do.

All of this culminated in the onset of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD), a dirty little acronym for some. I had to deal with irregular sleep patterns, nightmares, and the hyper vigilance that comes with an extremely overactive sensory system. In addition, there was also a high degree of paranoia since, let's not forget, we still had an outstanding suspect. Where do you seek help, especially in a job where being “macho” has been ingrained? You can go to the department's psychological services, but at what cost? Tell the “shrink” all this and then have him pull me off the job for being nuts? I don't think so.

You have a few other options: you can internalize it and self-destruct, externalize it at someone else's expense, or seek outside help. I did see a psychologist and he was somewhat helpful but did he really know what I was going through?

As with many police officers, I have a hard time taking advice/help from someone about a situation they have never experienced. All I ended up doing was rehashing everything, and I sometimes left the psychologist's office more frustrated than when I arrived. I tried talking to my peers but there was a lot of that “macho” stuff going on. One lieutenant told me that other officers had been through it and they were fine, but were they really? Was it all a façade, or was I crazy?

I began speaking with those other officers and found their reactions varied. The one thing they had in common was that all suffered some type of lingering response, some worse than others. The ones who spoke about it seemed much better off than those who kept things to themselves. Some officers may never recover from the scars but for most, the damage dissipates with time.

I am working to develop an awareness class that will incorporate some of the things that I have discussed. My goal in writing and lecturing about a critical incident such as mine is to give

officers some sense of what to expect and how they can deal with the stress that comes with coping and surviving the aftermath of a police-involved shooting.

I can't help but reiterate that all that training we go through should include setting aside some time to learn about what happens AFTER a critical incident. Failing to do so may result in the loss of another life – that of the officer involved. I hope this helps to begin the discussion, with more to follow.