

Commentary...

I almost shot an unarmed black man

By **Jim Cornelius**
News Editor

The “police shoot an unarmed black man” narrative is distressingly common.

In some cases, as in Ferguson, Missouri, distortions and outright lies about a justified shooting have become the narrative, and are impervious to facts. In others, like the BART station shooting in Oakland in 2009, where an officer mistook his pistol for his Taser and killed a man on the ground, it is evident that a terrible mistake was made. In still others, like the shooting of Walter Scott several times in the back after a traffic stop in South Carolina, a crime was clearly committed by the officer (who is in jail).

My perception of these types of incidents was shaped by an encounter I had back in June of 1993 while I was working at the Pachmayr Trap, Skeet & Sporting Clays Range in El Monte, California.

The range was closed that day. Work crews were doing maintenance on the traps and my crew was doing inventory in the pro-shop. A man — a regular customer — came running in to the shop and told us that a man had crashed his car on the adjacent 60 Freeway and had jumped the fence onto the range property. He was

a black man, the customer reported, and he was carrying a pistol.

The manager and I grabbed a couple of shotguns and went outside, while the others locked up the shop and called 911. Within moments, we could see a figure walking across the sporting clays course towards us. He was a black man, lean and muscular, mid-to-late 20s. He was shirtless and barefoot, which caught our attention because the area where he was walking was covered in all sorts of undergrowth including prickly-pear — and he was unfazed. He was also covered in blood.

As he approached us, we trained our shotguns on him and told him to stop. He walked calmly toward us, saying repeatedly, “Just shoot me, Color.” We could see the blood was from a cut on his head. It was streaming over his shoulders and down his chest. He walked calmly with his hands at his side. They were empty.

My partner, Mark, who had seen combat in Vietnam, said, “If his hands go behind his back, we shoot him.”

I nodded, thinking “I’m getting married in three days and I do NOT need this...”

Nevertheless, I kept the bead on his left nipple and I would have shot him without hesitation if he had made a move toward the back of

his waistband. Remember — we’d been told he had a gun.

We had ground to give, and the work crews at the traps had cleared out, so we retreated, slowly, shotguns held on the man’s chest. It was a long few minutes, but eventually a single Los Angeles County Sheriff’s Deputy showed up and took over the situation. The man initially refused to comply with orders to sit down on the ground and put his hands on the top of his head. He kept walking toward the officer, saying the same thing he’d said to us over and over again: “Just shoot me, Color.”

It looked to me and Mark like the situation was going to get ugly. But something suddenly clicked, and the man finally flopped down on the ground, though he did not put his hands on his head. The deputy — big, white and athletic — approached him cautiously hand on the butt of his pistol, got behind him and put a boot in the middle of his back and pushed him

over face-down in the dirt. The officer searched the man’s scant clothing. There was no weapon.

The deputy cuffed the man and got him to the car.

Mark and I unloaded our shotguns and went back to counting stuff.

A couple hours later, the deputy came back and told us that the subject had car-jacked and pistol-whipped a woman several miles up the freeway, roared down the 60 at high speed, went out onto the shoulder and rolled the car multiple times. Several witnesses said that he was armed when he jumped the fence onto the range. Police technicians took a metal detector out into the brush, for a half-hearted search but they never found a pistol. It was a huge, brush-choked area to cover; that pistol is probably rusting out there to this day.

The man was flying on cocaine (crack) and his heart rate was so high they had to hospitalize him. I never heard what became of his

case.

Whenever a shooting situation like the one in Tulsa or the one in Charlotte, or ... occurs, it puts me right back on that Southern California shooting range. Mark and I could very easily have shot an unarmed black man. Justified? Unjustified? Right? Wrong? A nightmare on every level, regardless.

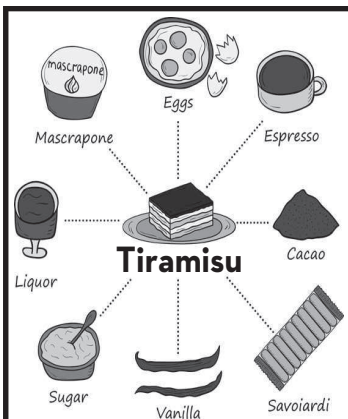
I’ll tell you this — I wasn’t thinking about his race at all when I had a shotgun bead on his chest. I was thinking: “Don’t do it; don’t do it; don’t do it.” It’s pretty unsettling to have a bloody, obviously drug-addled man walk calmly up a shotgun barrel, inviting you to shoot him.

Mark and I had the luxury of space, time, and somebody else to hand the situation off to. That situation had the best possible outcome. I am very thankful for that. And I’m very slow to judge those who have to face that kind of circumstance without recourse to make it somebody else’s problem.



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