

'Real-life' training helps prepare officers

By Jolene Guzman
The Itemizer-Observer

DALLAS — A Polk County Sheriff's deputy notices a tail light out on a passing vehicle.

He decides to pull the car over to address the issue with the driver. Sounds simple — and many times the routine stop is just that — but not today.

The deputy doesn't know it, but the driver is contemplating suicide, and when the deputy approaches the car, the driver jumps out. He charges the deputy, appearing to reach in his pocket.

The terrified passenger jumps out of the car and yells, "He's just depressed. Don't shoot him. He's unarmed!"

Not knowing what to believe, the deputy treats both men like a threat.

"You don't want to do this," he yelled as the driver approaches and taunts him.

The deputy steps around the back of his cruiser, still confronting the driver who doesn't stop. Within seconds, the deputy has circled around to the opposite side of the cruiser, with his back to the passenger, who has his hands in the air.

Gregg Caudill, the training officer for Polk County Sheriff's Office, has been observing the scene. He steps forward, "OK," he says.

All three men relax. This is training, but for about 30 seconds, it felt like real-life.

Looking at the deputy, Thomas Hutchinson, Caudill asks, "Why didn't you shoot him?"

"I didn't see anything in his hand," Hutchinson responded.

Caudill pointed out that he ended up having his back turned to the passenger, who he should have been watching.



JONATHAN JONES, left, plays the part of a subject trying to threaten Thomas Hutchinson in a Polk County Sheriff's Office training session. The program uses real-life events for training.

"That's how fast stuff happens," Caudill said. "That's how fast we have to recognize things and deal with them."

Hutchinson said the scenario got complicated fast and, while the passenger appeared to be trying to help, he couldn't trust what he was saying.

"I don't know him," Hutchinson said. "I don't know who to trust. There are really just a lot of unknowns."

Still, he didn't feel the need to fire a shot.

"Good job," Caudill said, sending Hutchinson back to his car to begin another training scenario involving a traffic stop.

Called CONSIM, the officer training program is meant to re-create incidents with a high degree of realism, including providing non-lethal versions of the same weapons officers have in the field.



Jonathan Jones and Matt Garrett pose in a hostage situation as trainer Gregg Caudill consults with a deputy.

Caudill set up the training session at the county shops on a warm September afternoon. He has firearms similar to those assigned to officers, except that they shoot paint "bullets."

"They hurt, kind of like a paint ball," Caudill said. Next to the guns are bottles of neutralized mace.

Most important, he has a binder of incidents to put deputies through.

"We train on everything, vehicle stops, mental health calls, everything we deal with," Caudill said.

Most of the scenarios are based on real incidents, he said.

"Then they (deputies) react based on our training," Caudill said. "We will talk about the good things and the things we could do better."

Deputies swing by the shops one by one and trade their guns and mace for the harmless versions. They put on protective head gear and sweatshirts over their uniforms, just in case paint bullets are fired.

Two sheriff's reserves volunteer to play the role of subjects or suspects in the scenarios. Caudill depends on them to be good actors.

Role players are given a script to follow, and officers are only given the amount of detail they would get from dispatch on a call. The point is to have officers walk into a situation where they don't know what they will encounter, Caudill said.

"With each scenario, there are objectives that you are trying to get the officer to meet," he said.

The reserves, Jonathan Jones and Matt Garrett, take their jobs seriously. They don't even wait until training begins to give the deputies a hard time.

"Come back for more?" Jones yells over to Hutchinson as he hops out of his cruiser.

Caudill smiles and picks up his CONSIM book.

"Don't go to your book Caudill. Give me something easy," Hutchinson said.

"That's not going to happen," Caudill shot back.

He wasn't kidding.

Caudill ran Hutchinson through the suicidal driver incident and another that has a passenger jump out and pull a gun on him. That time Hutchinson was forced to shoot.

Caudill said the sheriff's office wants officers to go through the lifelike training

at least twice a year. He said CONSIM is realistic enough to get adrenaline pumping.

"When you watch, you see their breathing amps up, their voice changes. It's real-life to them," Caudill said. "That's how we have to train."

Deputy Mike Smith is given a similar scenario, but this time it was the driver with the gun. The subject rushes him and Smith had to fire. The driver falls to the ground.

Smith calls in "shots fired" to simulated dispatch.

The passenger screams from inside the car. Smith moves around to the opposite side of his cruiser, putting more space between him and the driver, while keeping an eye on the passenger.

Smith wants to pull the passenger out and cuff him to make sure he doesn't become a threat. He's worried about the driver and whether he should help him if he is bleeding.

"What's our more safe option?" Caudill said, giving instruction without stopping the scenario.

"Waiting," Smith responded.

"You can bet your ass everybody going to be flying," Caudill said referring to back up. "Don't be quick to divide your attention until the scene is safe."

During a few scenarios, Caudill let the role players have fun in situation he calls "mouthy passenger."

Jones took advantage of the opportunity, using a steady stream of loud complaints and less-than-flattering names throughout each of those scenarios.

Caudill eggs him on, attempting to fluster the deputies. In one case, the deputy ignored him. Another took the driver out of the car to talk and another confronted the passenger.

All responses were fine in Caudill's estimation. There is no one right move, so long as the safety objective for the officers and civilians is met.

"That happens all the time — you get that mouthy passenger," he said. "This is real."

Smith said the scenarios are a reminder of what could happen in the field.

"It keeps the skills sharp," he said. "These situations aren't something that we deal with every day, but they could happen at any time."

Caudill agreed, saying that officers always need to be on their game, even in what seems to be common situations.

"Every traffic stop could be your last," he said. "That's why we train."

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