

Surviving a Lethal-Threat - The Aftermath

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In addition to the risks and dangers associated with operational policing there is the additional consequence of surviving a lethal-threat. For the vast majority of police officers, a fatal shooting incident is an event that they will never forget. In many instances, the consequences of surviving the lethal encounter will negatively effect them, and their family, for the rest of their lives.

In a recent Canadian study, eighteen police officers who had been involved in a fatal police shooting indicated that they had, to some degree, been subject to the physiological, psychological, physical and emotional factors associated with critical incident stress. The most commonly cited physiological factors experienced by these officers included perception of time, visual and auditory distortions. As the incident unfolded, individual officers noted that their deadly force encounter appeared to occur in slow motion. Often their vision was focused upon the perceived threat with minimal awareness of the events taking place around them. Finally, when shots were fired, they were generally heard as muffled sounds, even though the officers were not wearing ear protection devices.

“We stopped the car and got out. A couple of seconds later a shot rang out. My focus was on the threat. I fired three rounds off at the silhouette and hit the target, one fatal at the head. It was like a scene in a bad movie. It all happened in slow motion. I just knew I got him . . . it all happened in less than ten seconds. (Cst) “X” was lucky not to be killed.”

In addition to perception distortions, the majority of these police officers stated that they experienced a loss of fine motor co-ordination upon conclusion of their deadly encounter. Typically their hands would begin to shake or their legs would go into uncontrollable spasms.

After the fatal shooting incident concluded, the majority of officers who were interviewed stated that they faced a wide variety of psychological and physical effects associated with critical incident stress. The physical effects included a loss in appetite, sleeping pattern changes and a marked decrease in their sex drive resulting in an absence of sexual relations with their spouse or partner. One officer stated, “My sex life went down the tube, forget about that.” Another police

officer reported:

“Your mind says ‘You can’t cope with this.’ Sleep? I’d wake up every night for several months. I would never re-live the incident but my mind would focus on the incident.”

The psychological effects reported included depression, guilt, nightmares, flashbacks, a heightened sense of danger and fear. One of the officers related the flashbacks as a “video going on in your head that you can’t control; it just keeps playing the video over and over and over again and you’ve got no control to turn it off.”

The media was cited by most of the police officers as one of the greatest sources of stress immediately after their fatal shooting incidents. This was a consequence of the continual coverage that surrounded many of the fatal shooting incidents. Particularly painful was the speculation and supposition taken by many journalists who were impatient regarding the release of the official police investigation. These journalists would often produce media articles that were written in a negative manner towards the actions of the shooting officer or of the police agency that employed him.

Police agencies will not traditionally divulge the outcome of their investigation until the entire file has been reviewed by independent Crown Counsel regarding the possibility of criminal charges. Typically, the specific details of a police shooting and the subsequent police investigation are first publicly revealed during a Coroner’s Inquest. It is only upon the conclusion of this painstaking and tedious procedure that the media obtains the full story regarding the fatal police shooting.

Unfortunately, many of the interviewed police officers gave accounts of media distortions and inaccurate journalism occurring during the waiting period of the Crown review and the Coroner’s Inquest. These officers stated that the negative slant portrayed in many of the media articles served to further intensify their emotional and psychological state in regards to the fatal shooting incident.

“The media; I’ve never had a problem with what we did. We’re the good guys and out here to help the public and did a good thing, what we’re suppose to do, and now we’re getting f . . ked. I couldn’t watch the t.v. or read the papers; [they were] obvious examples of distortion.”

The vast majority of media interest would subside upon conclusion of the Coroner's Inquest. Several of the officers interviewed added that the Coroner's Inquest served as a pivotal point in their coming to terms with the shooting incident. Until the Coroner's Inquest, there was a degree of uncertainty regarding the investigative findings of the shooting, regardless of how confident they were in their actions.

Only upon the conclusion of this public disclosure were many of the officers able to get on with life and leave the tragedy of the shooting incident behind them. Even years after the fatal shooting incident had taken place, all of the officers reported that they considered it a significant event in their life, one that they will never forget. In this regard, one police officer stated:

"This guy is not gonna f. . k-up my life forever. It's completely up to me; whether I cope with this and get on with life. I'm sure I drank too much several times. I think about it every day. If your gonna give up then its gonna get to you."

Occasionally, the peers of the officers who were involved in fatal shootings were reported to add to the already stressful situation. In several instances, it was reported that the peers did not treat their colleagues in the same manner as before the shooting incident. The perception was that often these peers would isolate or ignore the officer. In other cases, the perception was that the peers would provide inappropriate gestures of support. For example, one officer reported that immediately after his fatal shooting he was given a mug full of rum and then asked to provide an official statement.

It was reported that some individuals would make jokes or comments that were particularly hurtful and in-appropriate. One officer stated that after the shooting incident his peers would frequently remark, "How are you doing killer?" Another police officer reported:

"You'd be having a normal conversation and someone would make a stupid ass remark [regarding the shooting]. They'd have a tendency to use black humour. It may be made with good intentions but can be annoying as hell. Wrong thing to say!"

Post-Shooting Effects And Deadly Force

Several of the police officers who were involved in a fatal shooting reported marital or relationship breakdowns shortly after the incident. Often these individuals stated that their relationship with their significant other was “o.k.”, prior to the shooting. However, when faced with the pressures and stresses that accompanied a fatal shooting, the relationship often crumbled. One officer stated “I went through two marriages after the shooting incident”. Another officer reported, “My marriage ended within a year or two after the shooting. I became distant from my wife and I didn’t talk about the shooting incident with her.”

However there was an equal number of police officers who spoke highly of their spouses or significant others; intimate relationships that served to support the police officer during a time of personal crisis. Often these established relationships were strengthened as a result of the shooting incident.

Unfortunately, several of the officers stated that their spouse, significant other or their children personally suffered as a result of their shooting incident. The police officer’s fatal shooting frequently became a “family crisis”. One officer stated: “ My wife needed help [psychological] after what happened to me.” Another officer reported:

“Not too many people know this, but as a direct result of my [fatal] shooting, my wife developed an eating disorder. We both know it was in response to me killing the guy. Even though its been years since the shooting she still suffers with the disorder and a few other things.”

In addition to changes in personal relationships, several of the officers interviewed indicated that they became heavy substance abusers shortly after the fatal shooting incident. In conjunction with the substance abuse some of these individuals reported that they became “burned-out”. These officers would deliberately work long hours and apply for stressful assignments as a means of coping with their traumatic experience. This was also explained as a means of showing to their peers that “they were o.k.” as they had *survived* the shooting. In addition, management would be able to see that they could return to even tougher assignments, without any noticeable effect.

In these stressful positions it was also easier to identify and “fit in” with their peers. In many instances, the peers within these assignments were described as “heavy drinkers”. In addition, several of these individuals had also gone through a divorce. One officer stated he could easily identify with his team members as eight of the officers, within the small section, had also been divorced. However, in hindsight, the officer stated that his new assignment actually perpetuated his stressful lifestyle.

Further personal changes in lifestyle that were directly attributed to the fatal shooting incident, included a change in diet. One officer reported that as a result of the shooting he became a vegetarian.

“Thou shall not kill really means thou shall not murder. I stopped eating meat and never went back to it for over ten years. Now I may have the occasional small bit of meat. It’s hard to explain why, I don’t know exactly why.”

In summary, this study also revealed that the eighteen police officers who were involved in a fatal shooting all reported various degrees of physiological, psychological, emotional and physical effects that they attribute directly to the shooting. Significantly, these symptoms were also present in the two officers who did not pull the trigger but were present when their partner fired the fatal shot. One of these two individuals was so adversely affected by the shooting that he has since left the job. Also noteworthy is that, in the majority of these cases, the individuals involved did not receive any positive public recognition from their police agency regarding the shooting.

In many instances, the media had insinuated police “wrong-doings” reporting that criminal, disciplinary or civil actions were imminent against the police officers involved. However, the police officers interviewed denied any formal repercussions as a result of their shooting incident. Unfortunately, most of these individuals reported personal upheaval and tragedy that they continue to carry with them, several years after the shooting incident. These are consequences that the media failed to report but are nevertheless very real and profound to the officers involved and their families.

As this study has demonstrated, police training must address the significant issue of stress management. Police officers often experience enormous psychological, physical and emotional

stresses during a lethal-threat. In many instances these stressors continue to effect the officer long after the lethal-threat has been resolved. Police personnel who are trained to reduce the effects of stress, when facing a life-threatening situation, may be able to seek alternatives to deadly force.

Finally, police officers who have been involved in a fatal shooting often require psychological counselling and support, if they are to become productive members once again. Importantly, the families of police officers who have been involved in a shooting incident additionally need to be included within this process. These individuals may also be “survivors” of a lethal-threat, requiring similar counselling and support if they are to maintain their relationship with their police partner or significant other.

Source: Parent, Richard B. (1996) *Aspects Of Police Use Of Deadly Force In British Columbia: The Phenomenon Of Victim-Precipitated Homicide*. Masters Thesis. Simon Fraser University.