

## **Beware: Active Shooters Can Kill Cops, Too**

**It takes a lot of courage and skill to stop a killer, and sometimes it ends badly for the good guys.**

*October 01, 2008*

In recent columns, I've written about the dramatic change in police response to active shooters following the Columbine incident.

Before Columbine the universal protocol was to surround and wait for SWAT.

After Columbine, rapid deployment by teams of four officers became the new response protocol. Active shooters countered by taking away the most critical element of all: Time. Waiting for additional officers to arrive often proved too late to be effective.

The latest response protocol is for the very first arriving officer to deploy immediately and engage the shooter. The rationale being every tick of the clock means more victims. The faster the response, the fewer the victims.

This newest school of thought is backed by research by an Ohio police trainer, which reveals that most active shooters do not take on police, instead preferring defenseless victims.

In August, I attended three TREXPO East 2008 active shooter track courses. Each instructor recommended a multi-tiered police response beginning with the very first responding officer(s) on scene deploying immediately, not waiting for backup.

The next tier has additional officers also deploying immediately upon arrival. Once inside, the two groups of officers hook up with the initial officer, as they did in the Salt Lake City shooting. The next tier involves additional resources—including SWAT—supplementing and ultimately replacing the first responders.

This new multi-tiered approach recognizes the reality that time is not on our side and takes advantage of the full range of LE resources, from initial responders to SWAT.

While research shows that most active shooters don't take on police, not all active shooters follow the script. The recent tragic shooting death of Martinez, Calif., Sgt. Paul Starzyk on Sept. 6 is proof of that.

The call began as a domestic violence—a male armed with a handgun hunting for his estranged wife, terrorized a beauty shop and panicked those inside. Unknown to the suspect, his wife was hiding inside a closet. However, another female fled from the shop into an adjacent apartment with the suspect in hot pursuit. There, he shot and killed her.

Meanwhile, Starzyk and another officer arrived and immediately deployed when they heard the shots and screams. By all accounts, Starzyk was the epitome of a tactically sound officer. A former SWAT team member, he was the Martinez PD's tactical training officer.

Armed with an AR-15, Starzyk and another officer armed with an MP-5, were about to enter the apartment when the suspect suddenly and blindly stuck his .38 out from the door and shot Starzyk above his body armor.

Both officers fired back, downing the suspect.

A third officer with a K-9 pulled the gravely wounded Starzyk out of the line of fire, and then sent his K-9 after the suspect. When the suspect pointed his gun at the K-9, the K-9 officer shot the suspect.

Very clearly, this active shooter, if given more time, would have definitely continued killing innocent people until he was physically stopped. And stopped he was by three courageous Martinez police officers. But at a very high cost—the life of Sgt. Paul Starzyk, the first Martinez officer killed in the

line of duty since 1973. He was killed by a "one in a million," blind shot. What does this mean to us in law enforcement?

No matter how you cut it, ours is a dangerous profession. This tragedy reinforces the courage it takes to face danger without hesitation. No matter how tactically prepared we may be, the element of luck is always lurking.

The adage, "There but for the grace of God, go I," comes readily to mind. If we're truly honest with ourselves, most of us have escaped close calls by some miracle. Perhaps merely because it "wasn't our time."

However, perhaps the most important lesson we can gain from this tragedy is the reaffirmation of our resolve to protect the innocent to the utmost of our ability, regardless the risk.

By sacrificing his own life, Sgt. Starzyk ensured that others would live. I have no doubt whatsoever that he knew precisely the danger he was facing. And yet, he never hesitated to do what he knew had to be done.

His was the ultimate act of courage and sacrifice.

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