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NO SUCH THING AS “FRIENDLY” FIRE

*As good guys and bad ramp up their arsenals,
the margin of error disappears*

For Police Issues by Julius (Jay) Wachtel. During the evening hours of December 8 Ian David Long, 28, [burst into a busy Los Angeles-area nightclub](#), threw smoke bombs into the crowd and unleashed a barrage of more than fifty rounds from a Glock .45 pistol. Twelve patrons were shot dead and one was wounded. Long hid and waited for police. Two officers soon burst in. Long opened fire, striking Ventura County sheriff's sergeant Ron Helus five times. A sixth and fatal wound, to the heart, was accidentally inflicted by return fire from a highway patrol officer armed with a rifle.

Long legally purchased his gun two years ago. He had enhanced it with a laser sight and high-capacity magazines, the latter illegal in California yet easily obtainable elsewhere. Why he acted may never be known. During the horrific episode the six-year Marine Corps vet (he served in Afghanistan) [posted Instagram messages](#) denying any motive other than insanity: “Fact is I had no reason to do it, and I just thought... f***it, life is boring so why not?”

Long would soon bring the incident and his life to a close with a shot to his own head.

One month later, on February 12, [eight NYPD officers responded](#) to a report that a man with a gun forced two employees into the back of a mobile phone store. Among those who rushed to the scene were two detectives who were nearby when the call came.

Detective Brian Simonsen, 42 and his partner, Matthew Gorman, 34, accompanied two beat cops into the premises. Just then the robber, Christopher Ransom, a deeply troubled 27-year old, emerged from the back, flaunting a handgun. [A 42-round barrage instantly followed.](#)

Both detectives were wounded; Simonsen, fatally. A beloved veteran cop, he was working on his day off. The 27-year old suspect, a chronic offender, was also wounded. As it turned out, his “gun” was a realistic-looking toy, so only police rounds flew. An accomplice who was outside acting as a lookout fled but was arrested later.

According to the FBI, 455 law enforcement officers [were feloniously killed with firearms](#) between 2008 and 2017. Seventy-one percent (323) fell to a handgun. Most common calibers were 9mm. (94), .40 (78) and .45 (36). Twenty-three percent of deaths (104) were caused by high-powered rifles, with calibers .223/5.56 (34) and 7.62 (26) the most frequent.

During the same period 800 other cops [were feloniously injured with a firearm](#). Handguns were implicated in 557 (72%) of the 770 instances [where kind of gun was known](#). Top three handgun calibers were 9 mm. (166), .40 (92) and .45 (80). Rifles caused 142 injuries (18%); top three calibers were 7.62 (60), .223/5.56 (28) and 5.45/5.56 (15).

[Firepower and gun availability](#) have grown exponentially during the past decades. Excluding exports, [domestic manufacturers produced](#) 1,333,241 semi-automatic handguns in 2008. Of these, about 827,000 were in 9mm. and larger caliber. [A decade later](#), in 2017, a staggering 3,415,582 pistols were produced for domestic consumption. About 2,220,000 were 9mm. caliber and beyond.

With guns so abundant (and so enthusiastically marketed) it's inevitable that many will wind up in the hands of criminals (click [here](#) for a related blog post and [here](#) for a longer piece.) In 2017 ATF traced 316,348 firearms, mostly seized by local police. Nine-millimeter pistols were the most frequently recovered, coming in at 84,196 (27% of the total). A more powerful caliber, .40, was second at 38,311. Forty-five caliber took fifth with 24,242, and .357 came in eighth at 9,500. Rifles were close behind. The devastating 5.56mm./ .223 duo had 9,359 cumulative recoveries, while the fierce 7.62mm. of AK-fame had 7,145. These weapons are especially problematic, as their super high-speed projectiles create large temporary wound cavities that pulverize nearby organs and rupture blood vessels (click [here](#) for a summary and [here](#) for a quick course.)

What's available to counter these threats? Body armor. Its protective qualities are strongly impacted by [bullet size, composition and, especially, velocity](#). Arranged by protective capability, from least to most, here are [the most recent Federal standards](#) for ballistic vests:

Armor Type	Test Bullet	Bullet Weight (grains)	Reference Velocity (ft/s)
IIA	9 mm FMJ RN	124	1165
	40 S&W FMJ	180	1065
II	9mm FMJ RN	124	1245
	.357 Mag JSP	158	1340
IIIA	.357 SIG FMJ FN	125	1410
	.44 Mag SJHP	240	1340
III	7.62mm NATO FMJ (M80)	147	2780
IV	.30 Caliber M2 AP	166	2880

Adapted from “Selection & Application Guide 0101.06 to Ballistic-Resistant Body Armor,” p. 12.

FMJ: full metal jacket; JHP: jacketed hollow point; S: soft point; RN: round nose

Levels IA, II and IIIA denote increasingly protective (read: bulkier, heavier, hotter) versions of soft body armor. Defeating high-velocity rifle rounds such as the 7.62 or .223 requires the hard armor of levels III and IV, which are unsuitable for patrol.

During 2008-2017 twenty-two officers died from [bullets that penetrated their body armor](#). (Keep in mind that this doesn’t include non-fatal penetrations, which are likely far more frequent, nor fatalities caused by wounds to areas not protected by armor.) Only one penetration death was attributed to a handgun, a so-called 5.7mm. “[big boomer](#)” with ballistics similar to high-powered rifles (an example is the [FN “Five-seven.”](#)) All other penetration deaths were caused by rifles, with 7.62mm. and 5.56/.223 caliber tied for the top spot [at six deaths each](#).

How protective should armor be? Given the [tradeoff between comfort and safety](#), Level II has probably been the most popular. [Here’s what the Feds think](#):

For armor intended for everyday wear, agencies should, at a minimum, consider purchasing soft body armor that will protect their officers from assaults with their own handguns should they be taken from them during a struggle; Level IIA, II or IIIA as appropriate. (p. 21)

Of course, even the most bullet-resistant body armor can't protect against wounds to exposed areas. [A recent Houston drug raid](#) gone sour left four officers wounded. Two were struck in the neck, one in the shoulder, and one in the face (all fortunately survived.)

Let's return to our two examples of "friendly fire." We don't know whether the Ventura County sergeant was wearing a ballistic vest. But only a cumbersome armor-plated garment could have protected him from the rifle round fired by his colleague. As for the NYPD detectives, neither was wearing armor, so the consequences seem, with the benefit of hindsight, sadly predictable. Here's how the victim officers' superiors explained the tragedies:

[Ventura County Sheriff Bill Ayub](#), about the death of Sgt. Helus: "In my view, it was unavoidable. It was just a horrific scene that the two [deputies] encountered inside the bar."

[NYPD Chief Terence Monahan](#), the agency's top uniformed officer, about the death of Detective Brian Simonsen: "We talk about the tactics, we talk about incidents that have occurred over the course of the last six months. You want to avoid that crossfire situation. But understand — it's great to train — everything happens in a second. You're reacting within seconds and you're in fear for your life. Your adrenaline is high."

"[Routinely Chaotic](#)" addressed the chaos and confusion that accompany some street encounters. Can it occasionally lead cops to shoot each other? Well, we're no tactical wizards, but before conceding that such things are inevitable, here are a few ideas for preventing poor outcomes:

- As NIJ suggests, everyone should wear body armor that will, at a minimum, stop a projectile discharged by a colleague. That rules out the use of long guns other than during highly coordinated tactical responses.
- After [Columbine](#), delaying (i.e., "surround and call-out") is out of favor when innocent lives are at stake. Still, responses must not become chaotic. To prevent possibly lethal confusion an early arrival should remain behind to coordinate colleagues as they show up.

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- Fire discipline is essential. Even the most impromptu entry team must designate “point” and “cover.” Who will engage, and who will protect those engaging, must be explicit from the start.
- [Routinely Chaotic](#) pointed out that “butting in” can prove lethal. Late-arriving officers, *including supervisors*, must take their cues from cops already on scene.

Of course, it’s not just police lives that are at risk. “[Speed Kills](#)” mentioned that innocent citizens are occasionally wounded and killed by misplaced police gunfire. (We distinguish this from purposeful shootings of citizens who turn out to be innocent.) Googling brought up two recent examples. In one, police bullets pierced a wall and [killed a six-year old boy](#) in his home. In the other, two bystanders – a 46-year old woman and a twelve-year old boy – [were injured by police bullets](#) that were meant for a fleeing suspect.

In our gun-crazed land the threats that citizens pose to cops and to each other, and that cops occasionally pose to innocent citizens and other cops, are ballistically identical. Officers must routinely exercise great care to avoid compounding this intractable dilemma. We’re confident that at least to that extent, Sheriff Ayub and Chief Monahan would certainly agree.