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WHEN COPS KILL

Individual differences are key to understanding why some cops shoot

    By Julius (Jay) Wachtel. This much is known. During the early morning hours of May 11, 2008 someone opened fire outside a fast-food restaurant in Inglewood, California, a working class community adjoining the L.A. Airport. Patrol officers who happened to be nearby saw a man jump into the back of a car. The vehicle then headed in their direction. Whether it was moving slowly, as witnesses say, or speeding right at them, as the officers claim, is a matter of controversy. Thinking that the man who got in the car fired the shots, and fearing they were in harm's way, the officers opened fire, wounding two of the vehicle's occupants and killing a third.

    As it turned out, no one in the oncoming car had done anything wrong. Within days the Inglewood police chief expressed her condolences but stopped short of apologizing. "I won't go so far as to call it a mistake. The process that the officers went through had a very tragic outcome."

    This much is known. During the late evening hours of May 17, 2008, police officers responded to a hardscrabble neighborhood in north Long Beach, California on a 911 call about someone behaving erratically. On arriving they spotted a thin, shirtless, middle-aged man wandering around. Whether he "charged" them, as the officers insist, or was minding his own business, as witnesses claim, is a matter of controversy. Unfazed by a Taser strike and baton blows, the man punched an officer in the face and grabbed his stick. As they tumbled to the ground the cop's partner pulled his gun and fired, with lethal results.

    It turned out that the dead guy was a diagnosed schizophrenic whom other officers had previously handled without serious difficulty. By all accounts he was a harmless pest. Just before the fatal encounter he gave a gift basketball to a local kid; tragically, the youth ran over and watched him die. Irate residents surrounded the officers and only dispersed when reinforcements arrived. Police were criticized for not dispatching a mental health unit. Whether one was available wasn't said.

    Cops hate to admit error. But assuming that 19-year old Michael Byoune didn't deserve to be shot dead for riding in a car, and that 46-year old Roketi Su'e didn't deserve to be shot dead for being crazy, that's exactly what these episodes were: mistakes. And they didn't just "happen". In the first example officers acting on incomplete information wrongly identified someone as a perpetrator, leading them to interpret innocent behavior as threatening. In the second case there wasn't even a

crime to begin with, only a mentally disabled person of the type that patrol officers successfully deal with every day. Why these particular cops couldn't handle the 120-pound man without shooting him is yet to be explained.

Acting in the absence of good information, jumping to conclusions and making tactical errors are bad enough by themselves: when these three sins are combined the consequences can be deadly. Officers aren't robots; differences in personality, experience and training can make them respond differently. Some may escalate force too quickly, others not quickly enough. Still, most are very careful about using guns; if they weren't every traffic violator who reached for a wallet before being asked would wind up dead.

What to do? Here are some commonsensical approaches to preventing needless shootings:

- Being a real professional means dealing with the good and the bad and the ugly. Engage officers in continuous dialogue about lethal force. Dispassionately examine screw-ups. Provide moral support but don't make excuses.

- Adopt the "best practices" model from private enterprise. Officers make excellent decisions to not use deadly force all the time. Reward them! Praise examples of good work at roll-call; use them to set behavioral standards and for training.

- Don't ignore individual differences. A minority of officers use a majority of force. Personality traits such as impulsivity must be proactively sought out and addressed, hopefully before hiring, no later than during field training.

- Policing is a contact sport. Insure that officers can always go mano-a-mano through regular physical combat training.

- Rethink pay plans. Day in, day out, it's patrol work -- not investigations, not SWAT -- that's the more mentally and physically challenging. Demand that street officers stay in good shape and compensate them accordingly.

- Police work is done in an uncertain environment. Making it perfectly safe for cops can make it perfectly dangerous for everyone else. Those loath to take personal risks should be encouraged to look for a different line of work.

To advance the profession one thing is crucial: shed the cloak of denial. All those efforts spent building bridges to the community can be rendered moot in the instant it takes to squeeze that trigger.