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## Preventing the 10 Deadly Errors 30 Years Later

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In 1975, Los Angeles Police Department **Homicide Investigator Pierce R. Brooks** authored “...officer down, code 3” that now, 30 years later, still stands as one of the most compelling accounts of the dangers associated with the law enforcement profession. In this landmark book, Detective Brooks identified 10 Deadly Errors that repeatedly have led to officers’ deaths. For the past 30 years, law enforcement officers in the United States at every level of the profession—from recruit trainers to supervisors—have read, on at least one occasion, these 10 Deadly Errors.

Although felonious, line-of-duty law enforcement deaths have decreased during this time (from 129 in 1975 to 57 in 2004), officers continue to be assaulted and killed every year.<sup>1</sup> In many cases, they have committed one of the 10 Deadly Errors. To help his fellow officers, the author offers some simple, yet effective, steps they can take to combat the occurrence of these tragedies.<sup>2</sup>

### 1) FAILURE TO MAINTAIN PROFICIENCY AND CARE OF EQUIPMENT

#### Inspections

Regular inspections by first-line supervisors can ensure the proper care of weapons, vehicles, and equipment. Supervisors do not have to conduct them personally but can delegate the task to a properly trained member of the squad. Lesser experienced personnel may assist a proficient inspector, thereby gaining knowledge.

Inspections should be thorough but not necessarily as formal as those at the academy. After all, the goal is to educate, not embarrass, the officer. Inspections can take place one-on-one in a safe area. Supervisors should note deficiencies and also suggest remedies.

At a minimum, inspections should include checking for the presence of required equipment and ensuring that it is in good working order. Officers should have their equipment, especially flashlights and intermediate weapons, on their duty belts, not locked in the trunk of their patrol units. During hot weather, supervisors should remind officers that perspiration seeping into firearms and expandable batons could compromise their utility. Extreme changes in weather may adversely affect chemical weapons just as an accumulation of lint in the nozzle can inhibit delivery of the product. Officers should replace chemical weapons annually, regardless of whether they have expended the contents.<sup>3</sup>

Although not expected to check for mechanical problems as this is outside their scope of expertise and best left to the motor pool or an outside agent, officers should visually examine the tires and lights of their patrol vehicles. They also must inspect and clean their units, especially the backseat area, prior to and at the end of patrol.

Officers also should briefly inspect the station house, especially areas where suspects may be processed. Are there physical barriers between suspects and civilian personnel? Is the processing area clean, or are there innocuous weapons of assault, such as pens, telephones, computer monitors, or coffee mugs, present? What about the area where the suspect will wash? Are chemical cleaners present? Toilet plungers? Breakable mirrors? What else is around? Snow

shovels? Brooms? Fire extinguishers? Officers should take on the mind-set of a motivated, assaultive offender going to jail for a long time and then inspect the station house.

#### Training

Departments can promote proficiency with firearms by facilitating training with them. At a minimum, agencies should provide information about possible tax incentives for training expenses. Although all departments face budgetary challenges, they should encourage officers to attend brief training sessions (one box of ammunition or less) that take place during different lighting conditions. Officers should shoot from a barricaded position or with the support hand. Allowing officers to use lunch breaks or down time to practice would incur no cost. Of course, agencies should have a supervisor or specially trained squad member available to assist with remedial training and provide an adequate supply of materials to clean the weapons.

Proficiency with impact weapons should prove even easier, and cheaper, to maintain. At least once a month, a squad should shorten roll call and practice riot-squad formations. A pad or heavy bag for departmental training should not pose a major expense (even a stack of used tires can serve as an impact-weapon target). During this training, supervisors can review proper techniques with the striking weapon, including acceptable and prohibited target areas, and also note deficiencies or the need for supplemental training. In general, officers should be able to correctly strike a target for 30 seconds without sacrificing technique.

Officers also must remain competent in first aid. They always should check the first-aid kit in their patrol units and replace any missing items or, at least, leave a note indicating what is needed. Supervisors should quiz officers on proper response to first-aid situations. For quick reference, officers can attach CPR or other first-aid information to their clipboards.

While maintaining their proficiency and properly caring for their weapons, vehicles, and equipment, officers must not forget their most important asset, their brains. Officers must keep this most vital tool in excellent working order, too. Supervisors should provide them with digestible recounts of recent case law interpretations and show them how these court decisions impact their day-to-day actions. They should quiz officers with “what if?” scenarios and critique and discuss their responses. This will better prepare officers and improve their decision-making processes.

Officers must receive information about how others in the profession are being assaulted or killed. The Internet can provide a number of resources.<sup>4</sup> Officers should study these incidents and learn about steps to take to avoid becoming involved in similar situations.

Ultimately, each officer must take responsibility for maintaining proficiency and care of weapons, vehicles, and equipment. Supervisors can facilitate the process. Squads

### A CAPTAIN'S TALE

Long ago lived a seaman named Captain Bravo. He was a manly-man who showed no fear in facing his enemies. One day, while sailing the seven seas, a look-out spotted a pirate ship and the crew became frantic. Captain Bravo bellowed “Bring me my Red Shirt.” The First Mate quickly retrieved the captain’s red shirt and whilst wearing the bright frock the captain led his mates into battle and defeated the pirates.

Later on, the look-out again spotted not one, but two pirate ships. The captain again howled for his red shirt and once again vanquished the pirates.

That evening, all the men sat around on the deck recounting the day’s triumphs and one of the them asked the captain: “Sir, why did you call for your red shirt before battle?”

The captain replied: “If I am wounded in the attack, the shirt will not show the wound and thus, you men will continue to resist, unafraid.”

All of the men sat in silence and marveled at the courage of such a manly man.

As dawn came the next morning, the look-out once again spotted not one, not two, but TEN pirates ships approaching. The rank and file all stared at the captain and waited for his usual reply. Captain Bravo calmly shouted: “Get me my brown pants.”

“Fear is a reaction.  
Courage is a choice.”

~ Anonymous

“While officers may perform a search in different ways, they should use a systematic and complete method.”

Detective Petrocelli serves as the training coordinator for the Passaic County, New Jersey, Sheriff’s Department.



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