

AMBUSH

By Steven A. Rhoads, Ph.D.

New York City. Las Vegas. San Diego. Pennsylvania. Tacoma, WA. Atchinson, KS. The list goes on. Large cities, small cities, urban environments or rural counties – never in the history of this nation have there been such unprecedented numbers of ambushes of police officers.

While, historically, approximately 200 police officers are ambushed in citizen attacks each year, there have been dramatic increases in the incident rate of officers who had no contact with the suspect, were not known to the suspect, and were killed or significantly injured solely due to their profession. An ambush is defined by the IACP as either a “spontaneous” or “entrapment/premeditated” occurrence. A “spontaneous” ambush is one in which there is contact with the officer and, due to the emotions or circumstance of the moment, the suspect has attacked an officer. An “entrapment/premeditated” ambush is one in which no prior contact with the suspect has occurred. The National Police Memorial reports that entrapment/premeditated attacks were up 56% in 2014. And there has already been a 21% increase this year!

Just as there has never been such an outright attack on officers, there has never been such an unmitigated attempt by some to advocate violence toward the police. For several years now, certain rap music and fringe groups have glorified disrespect of authority and violence toward the police. At no time, however, have so many picked up this mantle. Rabble-rousers have attempted to turn any police use of force into a major conspiracy, not as a means of finding

© Photographerlondon | Dreamstime.com



justice, but rather only to further their own political agenda. Protesters march down the street of NYC, yelling, “What do we want? Dead cops. When do we want it? Now!” Prosecutors and organizational heads have given in to this agenda, and prosecution of police for doing their duty has risen dramatically! (But that’s a topic for discussion at a later time.)

Narcotic officers must realize that, twenty years ago, it was somewhat understood that if you got caught selling drugs, it was part of the risk that was taken, a part of doing business. Now, certain cartels and gangs have no hesitancy in using violence to avoid capture or detection. Thus, the risks of undercover work have drastically increased, as well. Charlie Fuller, President/Founder of the International Association of Undercover Officers, reports that the last two undercover officers ambushed while conducting a narcotics operation were in Virginia Beach, VA, and Chandler, AZ. Narcotics officers and law enforcement in general, then, must be more diligent in officer safety and survival than ever. There are certain factors that must be considered in this regard

and that is the purpose of this article: an examination of Subconscious Communication® and its importance for officer survival.

Subconscious Communication® is defined as that communication that exists by capitalizing on the power of the subconscious mind and its interaction with conscious awareness. The conscious mind is that which allows us to knowingly evaluate our surroundings and respond to them. The subconscious is the storehouse of our life’s experiences that allow a course of action to be taken as necessary.

There are certainly a number of conscious factors that officers must be aware of, day in and day out, to protect themselves. Unfortunately, the vast majority of us tend to go through life unaware or preoccupied. One of the most significant factors that officers must be continually aware of is their situational or environmental awareness. In general, however, humans become complacent. It is far easier to be unaware or uninvolved than to be constantly on guard. We tend to start believing that everything went

well with the last several drug deals/traffic stops/citizen encounters, so the next one has to be just as easy. In my opinion, complacency is the most common cause of a lack of awareness or alertness for all law enforcement officers.

In general, the most common distractions that cause a lack of situational awareness are likely to be:

Talking on the cell phone while on duty. There have been at least three documented instances where surveillance officers, tasked with protecting the undercover officer, were talking on the phone rather than actively watching the environment, leading to the ambush of the undercover officer. Officers driving down the road while on the phone fail to scan the environment around them, as they are preoccupied with the conversation taking place. Some of the worst offenders of this circumstance are officers doing side jobs (construction details, for example), where they sit – most often in a marked vehicle, in uniform – but are totally oblivious to vehicles, their occupants, or people in the area. This lack of awareness opens the door for a subject to approach without detection.

Parking in areas of restricted visibility while doing reports or engaging in other activities. The FBI reports that 82% of ambushes on police officers occur against single-officer circumstances. Sitting in the car, focusing one's attention on a report or mobile data entry distracts from being alert to the environment. As noted above, since most officers are in the vehicle alone, there is no one then watching their surroundings for danger. An even worse case scenario is **parking and sleeping on duty.** While I do not wish to embarrass the

officer or department, it is necessary to relate an incident to impress upon you the danger: a female officer was ambushed by a gang member while sleeping on a midnight shift in a school parking lot. Fortunately, she survived, but with significant injury! Sharply related to this is officers **parking in a location with other patrol officers or supervisors engaging in a conversation with both officers in their own vehicles.** This often occurs in isolated areas so as not to draw the attention of the general public, but it affords a suspect a great opportunity for ambush.

Lingering in fast food establishments, focusing on eating or conversation rather than an awareness of people entering or being in the building. Many officers become creatures of habit: We patronize the same eating establishments and, in many cases, have a set time in which we visit. Anyone observing these patterns then has a much better chance of preparing an ambush on the officer. Very closely related to this phenomenon is **walking into convenience stores or similar establishments without first scanning the environment for potential dangers.** I am aware of four situations where an officer walked in on an armed robbery in progress and thus was ambushed by the offender. For undercover operatives, setting meetings with violators or agreeing to meet the violator in unfamiliar establishments or those in which they have no control increases the risk of attack. For the undercover officers, operating where they have authority, advantage, and CONTROL is paramount for survival.

There are certainly other distractions that should be considered but, in the interest of brevity, I believe the point has been made.

Regrettably, even when an officer is determined to be consciously alert, there are subconscious factors that inhibit this desire. These subconscious factors are both internal and external in nature. Internal influences are affected not only by past and present experiences but also by personal meanings and desires we attach to our perception of these experiences. Perceptions can be defined as a process by which we select, organize, and interpret sensory stimulation into a meaningful and coherent picture of our environment. Perceptions are most commonly influenced by subjective rather than objective factors. Thus, at any given time, we act on what we think the facts are, *not* what they actually are. Two officers walking into the same situation, be it a drug deal or call for service, will have different response as they approach: one officer subconsciously senses danger and his body starts to physiologically prepare for action; the other still approaches, fat, dumb, and happy, with no awareness whatsoever of any hazard. They both cannot be correct in their response. One perceives danger, while the other does not. While our conscious mind is easily distracted, our subconscious mind is diligent in its desire to protect us. As an overly simplistic explanation, our subconscious mind is a 360-degree radar, constantly scanning our environment for potential hazards or danger. In a great book, "The Gift of Fear", author Gavin De Becker places a title on what I have taught since 1981 in my Detecting Danger courses. God has given each of us this "Gift of Fear", a little voice or warning bell to alert us to jeopardy. The single greatest warning we can receive is when we hear that phrase "I don't like it" in our own mind or said by others. Sadly, when we hear this warning, we respond by stating, "I don't like it

BUT"; we find some justification to go forward in spite of risks or danger our subconscious mind has processed – "I don't like it, BUT I want to get these guys", "I don't like it, BUT I can handle it", or similar justifications. When the mind says, "I don't like it," or any other related subconscious warning, there can only be one response. Unless it is a life-or-death situation in which immediate action has to be taken, the only response to "I don't like it" is: "I don't like it, **AND** I am going to back away and reevaluate this deal or circumstance." The only response we should have to "I don't like it" is to never follow with BUT, but always with AND!

Other subconscious factors that hinder our alertness or situational awareness include:

Needs. It would be impossible to explore this topic without some examination of Maslow's "Hierarchy of Needs", those physiological items humans need for survival. When we are tired, hungry, thirsty, ill, or deprived of other basic needs, our ability to perceive or respond to danger is limited. This should be a concern to all department heads in which twelve-hour shifts for officers are becoming the norm. Only twelve hours might not be an issue, but it is not just the twelve hours the officer is working. There is preparation time to come to work; travel time to and from work; and, in many cases, arrests or other assignments that cause the officer to work past the scheduled quitting time. Adding family obligations, court appearances, and other demands on the employee, and the ability to perceive and respond is affected.

Intimately related to this are

Emotions. Most people understand that, when we are in a bad mood or experiencing negative emotions,

our capacity to deal with situations effectively is hampered. We lack patience and tolerance that we might otherwise have, and our situational awareness decreases substantially. Most people fail to realize that, when we are in a really good mood or experiencing positive emotions, we suffer these same consequences. Two DEA special agents were ambushed and murdered where, I believe, their "good mood" significantly contributed to their deaths: One, having just received news of a highly coveted transfer to a desired location, and the other, with a wedding pending, were still sent to complete a drug transaction, only to be murdered by the suspects. It should, therefore, be the responsibility of every supervisor to be aware of and consider the emotions of their employees when making assignments.

Our Beliefs significantly impact perceptions and our recognition of environment or behavior. We behave in a manner consistent with what we believe to be true, *not* necessarily in a way consistent with existing facts. Once we have a belief, we then frequently seek out facts to support or justify our position/perception rather than accept the way things are. An officer who believes that he is in a safe neighborhood or responding to a minor call for service will minimize his situational awareness due to the belief that nothing violent happens in this circumstance. Narcotic investigators are the worst in this regard. They believe that the violator is good for the deal, and they ignore any warning factors that indicate the contrary. The violator may be late for the meeting, but they immediately start justifying the reason: "doper time", "traffic is heavy", etc. The violator never shows up! In this case, all that was lost was time; but if the belief is that the violator poses no danger, then the risk factors and the

possibility of ambush are certainly increased.

The next factor that inhibit our reactions is called Values. As people in general and law enforcement in particular, we value peer pressure, supervisor pressure, and, lastly, organizational values. Peer pressure is what occurs when we place more importance on what our peers or others may think of us than we do our own values. Peer pressure, perhaps more than any other circumstance, causes us to make decisions that produce difficulties or problems. We respond to situations in a manner consistent to what our peers may want us to do, rather than what we know is right to do. Supervisor pressure exists when assignments are given that allow for little or no discretion by the officer. When these demands are placed on the employee, the thought process shifts from situational awareness to the attitude toward the assignment, thus suppressing our responses in many cases. Lastly, organizational values have come to play a major role in law enforcement officers' ability to avoid ambush. With officers being fired or prosecuted at historic levels, many employees have conceded that they are afraid to take action for fear of being caught on a video or, worse, being the victim of citizen statements that are contrary to the facts. It is unfortunate that many administrators and politicians place a greater value on the attitudes and wishes of groups within the community rather than those of the officer. A balance must be achieved which places an equal value on community values/concerns and the welfare of the employee. The fear that now exists within law enforcement – being second-guessed, having every action placed under a microscope with the hope of finding something that can be used against them, and the uneasiness that their

job or freedom may be jeopardized – causes hesitation in action and responses. Since conditional alertness has been impacted, this then increases the opportunity for ambush.

Lastly (for this article) is **Training: What have we been taught, how have we been taught, and how do we apply that training to our circumstance?**

It is lamentable that we have not trained our officers for ambush. An informal survey of students attending my training programs revealed that only about ten percent acknowledge practicing drawing their weapon while seated in a patrol car. When asked how many have actually practiced firing their weapon from the vehicle, the number drops to about one percent. The numbers are similar when asked about drawing or firing while seated behind a table. Magnifying this lack of training are firing practices. Few officers actually practice drawing a weapon that is secured in a manner consistent with that which occurs while on duty. The concern of slowing down the draw is more critical than developing muscle memory and habits that will come to play in real-life situations. Narcotic officers often carry multiple weapons in various holsters, based on the day and weather, yet show up at the range to qualify only with their uniform patrol duty belt. They *must* be required to shoot using the holsters and weapons that are used during their *actual* assignment. The FBI reports that the average officer only shoots twice yearly, and my informal surveys suggest that only about 20% actually practice drawing their weapon on a regular basis. Complacency and laziness in preparing for ambush!

Bibliography

- Angie De Groot and George Fachner, "Protecting Officers from Ambush Attacks: Key Insights from Law Enforcement Executives," Officer Safety Corner, The Police Chief 81 (February 2014): 10–11.
- Charlie Fuller, International Association of Undercover Officers. WWW.undercover.org
- De Becker, Gavin. "The Gift of Fear." Little, Brown and Company; 1st edition (June 1, 1997)
- Maslow, A. H., "Motivation and Personality", 1954, Harper and Brothers

In conclusion, we must realize there is a real threat to the safety of law enforcement today. We must prepare mentally and physically for the reality of the possibility of ambush due solely to the fact that we have chosen to "protect and serve." To attend training and utilize that training for the possibility of ambush and the response that is appropriate for our survival and wellbeing. We have a responsibility to respect the dignity and protect the constitutional rights of all people. We also have the obligation to ensure that we go home safely and alive at the end of every shift.▶

PREPARE

"The FBI reports that the average officer only shoots twice yearly, and my informal surveys suggest that only about 20% actually practice drawing their weapon on a regular basis."

About the Author

Steven A. Rhoads, Ph.D., is a retired police chief and the founder of Steven A. Rhoads, Ph.D., Inc. (www.spottinglies.com) Chief Rhoads is a 43-year police veteran with experience in Virginia, Colorado, and Illinois, and is currently working for the Pueblo County, Colorado, Sheriff's Office. Dr. Rhoads is an internationally recognized expert in the field of Subconscious Communication® and has published several articles on the subject. For the past 35 years, he has instructed on the topics of Interview and Interrogation and Officer Survival. He has been utilized by several agencies to assist in the interrogation of suspects in major felony cases, and has been recognized for his success. His research in the field of behavioral science aids the student in obtaining a comprehensive view of the material from both an academic and practical perspective. Dr. Rhoads holds a Doctorate Degree in Behavioral Science from Union Institute & University and a Master's Degree from the University of Colorado. He is a three-time Medal of Valor recipient.

