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Reflections ON A FRIEND AND FOUNDATIONAL NTOA LEADER

Remembering MIKE FOREMAN

P. 22

DEPARTMENTS

44 CORRECTIONS
Invisible Scars: Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder in Corrections
By Chris McConnell

46 CRISIS NEGOTIATIONS
The Cost of Control: Why Crisis Negotiators Must Reframe Power to Win
By Alla Adam

50 LEGAL
Emergency Entry Revisited: The Supreme Court Clarifies the Fourth Amendment in *Case v. Montana*
By Eric Daigle

52 TRAINING
Building Decision-Makers, Not Just Shooters: On Purpose & By Design
By Jeff Johnsgaard

58 TEMS
Plastic Packaging Wrap for Patient Packaging
By Patrick Thompson, Anthony Hudson and Timothy J. Irvine-Smith

64 MEMBER TESTED AND RECOMMENDED

FOCUS

74 Lessons Learned from The Debrief – Does Your Team Take Advantage of Constructive Disagreement?
By Jon Becker

78 A Legacy of Sacrifice and Resilience: MRT/SORT
By Scott Brown

86 Academy Capstone: The Effects of Technology on Incident Command
By Kevin Macke

BUILDING DECISION-MAKERS, NOT JUST SHOOTERS:

ON PURPOSE & *BY* DESIGN

BY JEFF JOHNSGAARD

This is part two of a two-part series.

The real win in tactical training

For any officer, especially tactical officers, to perform at their best, they need to recognize the critical cues that emerge in rapidly changing situations and understand when to focus on them amid the flood of information that could overwhelm others. Additionally, they must interpret what those cues indicate to make quick decisions and take immediate action to neutralize threats or respond effectively.

To improve, tactical officers don't need more hours at the range. They don't require more repetitions of clean target transitions or faster reloads in a sterile environment. What they need most is the ability to see, anticipate, decide and act decisively in the chaos of real-world encounters. That ability can be described as "game IQ" or "game intelligence." It is developed not from raw speed or technical perfection but from exposure to as many realistic cues and representative experiences as possible. This exposure must also be connected to immediate decisions and actions. Unfortunately, this is precisely the area in which law enforcement training falls significantly short.

The core problem — unrepresentative training

Training should be connected to the cues and context where it will be recalled, ideally as early as possible in the training process. Much initial training is highly broken down and segmented. This encourages the individual to make adaptations to effectively transfer the skill to real-world situations in an efficient manner.

When you observe an academy, whether it's a new operator training or many experienced officer trainings, the drills appear structured, safe and logical. However, they have a critical flaw: They teach officers to respond to information that doesn't exist in the real world.

In Part 1 of this series (Winter 2026), I discussed an issue for instructors: talking about evidence-grounded concepts for better training but not actually applying or embedding them into their documentation to ensure institutional durability.

Let's consider the training example from that article again:

- A unit asked operators to practice identifying unsafe backgrounds.

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• The drill: solo operators faced six numbered targets. An instructor called a number; that was the "threat." Operators engaged if the background was clear or moved to do so.

On paper, it seemed like good training: multiple reps, randomness and safety. In reality, it reinforced repetitions of non-optimal behavior.

Problems:

• Officers searched for numbers on targets. Operators were being conditioned to focus on areas we wouldn't want them to in real life, for a cue that doesn't exist in real situations, and then to link that to a response.

• Poor conditioning practices. Operators engaged without proper follow-through, limited or no communication or movement, because the drill design didn't support it when these actions all need to be coordinated every time.

• The shoot signal came from the instructor's voice. In fact, one operator asked in the predrill briefing, "What is the shoot signal?" This, of course, got a laugh and was poked at by the team in good fun, but I brought it up during the debriefing. It was an excellent question.

All too often in our training, our people learn the "game'" we designed, and become very skilled at it. But is this game helping them in real life? The only answer to his question of "What is the shoot signal" should be, "When you believe the totality of the situation calls for you to legally/morally/ethically employ the use of deadly force."

If this isn't the case, then you are teaching them a game that doesn't reflect real life and you're not using your training time as effectively as possible. Most likely, you're having them focus on aspects of training that aren't relevant to real situations or won't be present, such as someone yelling, "Fire 3 rounds" or "Shoot target 3" or a symbol/number on the target.

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Let me be clear: This does not mean I never use a timer with an audible beep to run live fire drills. I do that occasionally, but I always do it after I have shown the scene, scenario or evolving encounter that led them to the current live fire target setup. I also demonstrate all the variability that can happen with the threat(s) once engaged. For example, they can still move, take time to cease or even continue being a threat. Our operators must understand where the drill, even a reload drill, "lives in real life."

I would never do this while standing out from cover; I have cover present, and if the operator is not behind it when their gun goes dry, they need to make explosive movement part of their drill. This illustrates the danger of non-representative training design. It ingrains habits and attentional patterns that will never be useful in the field.

Representative design — training the right cues

Representative design involves ensuring that training information aligns with real-world scenarios. It focuses on creating drills in which officers learn to recognize the same cues during practice that they will need in actual situations.

In skill acquisition research, Brunswik (1956) coined this term, and modern scholars (Pinder, Davids, Araújo & Renshaw, 2011) show that the closer training resembles real-world cues, the more likely skills are to transfer.

In law enforcement, this is most often broken during firearms training. Safety concerns typically result in sterile, artificial environments — flat ranges, static targets, predictable repetitions. However, the downside is that officers aren't practicing the skills that truly matter:

- Noticing cues of threat evolution.
- Deciding when to draw or move to a better position, not just how.
- Deciding when to shoot, how much, and when to stop.
- Deciding when to scan the area, check your own weapon and self-check for possible injuries — all while monitoring a threat that may not always drop and totally stop when engaged.
- Deciding when not to shoot at all.

These are the decision points that define life-or-death encounters.

Why representative design works

Vickers & Lewinski (2012) studied elite vs. rookie officers in shoot/no-shoot scenarios. The results were striking: Elites did not move faster than rookies; they moved sooner. Why? Because they knew where to look for important cues (such as the elbow angle of a suspect pulling their hand out of their pocket and about to spin).

This foresight to see the situation develop and act proactively is what distinguishes experts from novices. It is not intentionally taught. The elites in the Vickers & Lewinski study received much more training than the rookies. But I emphasize again, the elites did not reach that level "on purpose"; it was not the lesson plans or training days that intentionally got them there. These elites all made individual adaptations over time to develop a completely different skillset than was initially taught in their academy.

The concept of purposeful and deliberate training is often misunderstood in law enforcement. Key concepts like speed of assault, rapid sensemaking, decision-making, emotional regulation and attentional control form the foundation of excellent operator performance. Consider how you are teaching and reinforcing these skills intentionally. Do you include these concepts in your actual lesson plans? I have written other articles on this topic and will share them openly if you are interested.

Gary Klein's recognition-primed decision (RPD) model (Klein, 1993) explains rapid decision-making under time pressure as decisions aren't made by weighing options. Instead, rapid decisions come from "recognizing familiar patterns." Therefore, the more representative experiences an officer has, the richer their mental "Rolodex" of patterns becomes, and the quicker they can act in an optimal manner.

In sports science, this is known as game IQ — the ability to read the play, anticipate and react. In tactical work, the same principle holds true.

Building game IQ: Evolving and devolving threats

How do we teach game IQ? Not by more rounds fired, but by making better decisions in context. Officers must be given repeated, varied experiences of:

- Threats that escalate into lethal force.
- Threats that remain unchanged, leading to restraint, shifting tools and other responses.
- Threats that, once engaged, can escalate, such as dropping the weapon, fleeing or surrendering. Or, if already engaged, the threat doesn't just disappear. Have you ever had a threat cease and then become a threat again?

One excellent variation used by a live threat role player is to occasionally have them, once engaged, slowly fall to the ground with their weapon out of their hand but right next to them. They should actively roll on the ground and

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show continued physical ability by shouting, "Ah you shot me, help me!" and so on. This forces operators to re-prioritize what they would normally have just moved on from in a range. In fact, that exact scenario is necessary because all the flat range practice and the "wiring out" of that ability to reprioritize.

Next, increase the contextual pressure by adding a malfunction to the operator's weapon or creating other demands on their attention, such as a role player or their partner calling them. This is a perfect way to add "5 pounds" to their barbell to help them improve game IQ through attentional control. They should not simply perform their usual post-engagement skills but instead re-prioritize them while constantly monitoring a changing situation.

Should I keep my eyes on the person who was a threat but isn't now, especially if they have a weapon nearby? Or should I quickly check my gun to see if it's in battery? Can I glance at my partner as they call for support?

Understanding the speed of an assault, how long it takes for attention to shift away and return, versus the ability for a threat to reemerge, forms the framework for decision-making. We need to provide them with a high level of variability to help them develop a rich catalog of patterns to recognize in real-life encounters. That is high-quality training that, in my experience, carries over to performance in the street.

Each of these scenarios enhances decision-making skills. Officers learn not just to act, but to assess the evolving and potentially changing situation.

Here is an example redesign of the earlier team's drill:

• Role players emerge from cover, sometimes armed, sometimes not.

• Officers must decide: Draw or not? Fire or not? How much? When to stop? Move to cover? Communicate?

• The unit used non-lethal training ammunition with marking cartridges to identify hit locations. I do not disagree with this, but my experience is that using blanks with role players is much more effective than marking cartridges for the following reasons.

Hits on target do not necessarily mean instant incapacitation, so why measure performance that way? This can lead operators to believe that "solid hits" are linked to an immediate threat cessation, which is not realistic. Therefore, the role player should not always go down, and if they do, the process should take at least a few seconds.

If you're concerned about your operator's accuracy, I am too. I address this by using blanks with a trained role player. Anyone who has acted as a role player can tell whether they are being actively targeted by an operator firing blanks. If they aren't, they don't "start their down sequence." Blanks offer great benefits and are largely underused. Role players can have much less PPE, which allows them to express far more cues for emotional distress, pre-attack or pre-flight.

I hold all officers, especially tactical officers, 100 percent responsible for every round fired during training, although this can also be reliably achieved with blanks. You can still fire marking cartridges at the operators, but I believe the operator gains far more benefit when firing blanks most of the time in role-player training.

Also, you can still fire marking cartridges at your operators or use products like a Stress Vest to add in a pain penalty and increased performance pressure while keeping them in their operational kit and no PPE.

With blanks, the cues are real: body language, distance, angles, verbal interaction, target glancing and visual cues. Officers practice paying attention to the information that actually will matter in the field.

By exposing officers to numerous representative scenarios, such as potential threat presentations, we help them develop the same anticipatory skill.

The biggest win: Training to move sooner

The key insight from Vickers & Lewinski (2012):

• Elites were not faster — they were sooner.

• They could see the future of the encounter because they knew where to look.

• They then focused on locations and stayed ahead of the action-reaction curve.

• They did that while simultaneously getting a weapon system out, ready but not yet committed to a shot, unlike the rookies in the study.

By exposing officers to numerous representative scenarios, such as potential threat presentations, we help them develop the same anticipatory skill. They learn to identify evolving threats, distinguish non-threats and recognize when threats escalate.

Over time, they build a mental library of patterns Dr. Klein describes, used for rapid decision-making. This library allows them to act sooner rather than later. It is a straightforward task to take a few officers of different sizes and have them produce weapons and non-weapons from various pockets, jacket pockets, waistband locations and angles with different movements to deliberately teach pre-cues. Shoulders, elbow angles, hips, facial expressions, hand twitches, and biomechanics of rotation and presentation are all intentionally taught.

This is the difference between responding to gunfire and taking action before it.

Barriers: Why agencies fail to train this way

Why don't agencies do this already? Three reasons:

1. Safety concerns: Live fire takes priority, and scenario work is limited. However, representative design needs decision-making tools like non-lethal training ammunition, not just live rounds.

2. Tradition: "We've always trained this way" causes resistance. Vertical retirees aren't eager to change.

3. Measurement: Agencies only measure performance at the moment, not retention or transfer. They don't realize the illusion of learning until body cams reveal the gap and issue.

Train game IQ

If your team wants to move beyond sterile drills and into true decision-making, here is what I suggest, and can help guide you through.

- Hands-on operator training: Live courses using non-lethal devices and real scenarios that build genuine game IQ. As previously mentioned, create pre-assault cue training and connect it to quick decision-making. These are not just shoot/no-shoot "got you games." The moments preceding threat identification constitute the foundation of game IQ training.
- Lesson plan redesign: Auditing and reshaping drills to ensure representative design, early context, attentional control and decision-making are incorporated.
- Instructor development: Training your trainers to create evolving and devolving scenarios, rich in variability, to expand an officer's mental library of patterns.

The win is not about having more speed or more rounds; it is about smarter operators who can see sooner, make rapid and more accurate predictions, make better decisions, and have the physical skills to act decisively.

Conclusion: The future of tactical training

We cannot afford to train officers to respond to numbers on cardboard or to wait for instructor commands because the streets don't provide those cues. We are programming them to focus on information and locations that are not realistic, which undermines their training.

Instead, we need to train officers to recognize the cues that matter in the real locations where they appear and to "anticipate the play" so they can make quick, adaptive decisions. That's what representative design provides. This is how we build game IQ. This is how we develop officers who not only excel in training but also succeed in the field.

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