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LESSONS OF ST. PETE

Police tactics remain stagnant while officer killings continue to rise

By Julius (Jay) Wachtel. The tragic murders of three St. Petersburg, Florida police officers in less than a month vividly demonstrates that even as the decades-long decline in violent crime continues, [dropping from 506.5 to 429.4 per 100,000 population between 2000 and 2009](#) (preliminary figures indicate [the rate continued falling in 2010](#)), the threat posed to officers by armed criminals remains all too real.

According to the [FBI](#) the number of officers feloniously shot and killed was fairly stable between 2000-2007, fluctuating between 45 and 61 per year. Although an abrupt, unexplained dip in 2008 brought the toll down to 35, gun deaths promptly climbed back to 45 in 2009. Although last year's FBI LEOKA data isn't in, the National Law Enforcement Officers Memorial Fund [reported 61 officers killed by gunfire in 2010](#), matching the previous decade's high set nine years ago. What's more, the trend apparently continues, with [sixteen officers felled by gunfire](#) so far in 2011 compared with ten killed at this juncture last year.

Considering the relatively small numbers and fluctuation one can't conclude that officers face a heightened risk of being shot and killed. On the other hand, since society has apparently become less violent – the raw frequencies of violent crime are down along with the population-adjusted rates – one must wonder why cop killings aren't also on the decline.

If you've read our prior posts on such things, you'd know what we think – that the proliferation of firearms and their increased lethality likely play an important role. In the long run such issues are of course important. But for now let's consider some practical measures that might stem the toll.

On February 21, 2011 St. Petersburg, Florida police officer [David Crawford](#) responded to a nighttime prowler call. Spotting a youth who fit the suspect description, he parked his patrol car, took out a notebook and approached on foot. Crawford didn't know that the slight, skinny 16-year old had a record for auto theft and had just tried to break into a car. Nor that he was skipping school and running with a gang. Nor that he was armed with a .380 caliber pistol that he recently bought on the street for \$140.

The youth abruptly turned around and opened fire. Four or five rounds struck officer Crawford in the torso, fatally wounding him. He returned fire but to no effect. And no, he wasn't wearing a ballistic vest.

The community reeled. [Less than a month had passed since the murder of two other St. Petersburg officers.](#) On January 24 a warrant-service team comprised of a St. Petersburg detective, a deputy sheriff and a US Marshal went to the home of the spouse of Hydra Lacy Jr., 39 to arrest the local thug on an aggravated battery warrant. A large, beefy man, Lacy had a prison record and a serious assaultive history, including an arrest for sexual battery. Police reports indicated that he might be armed with his wife's 9mm. pistol and that he told her he would shoot it out before going back to prison.

The team, which had been seeking Lacy for weeks, was certain that he was inside. His wife answered the door. She quietly admitted that her husband was hiding in the attic. There were guns in the house, but she didn't know if he got one when he jumped out of bed.

A police K-9 officer, Jeffrey Yaslowitz, 39, was just coming off shift and offered to help. He and his dog found nothing at first. Officer Yaslowitz then boosted himself into the attic and confronted Lacy. The marshal soon joined him. The suspect seemed compliant and lay down on his stomach as though he was surrendering. Lacy then suddenly pulled a 9mm. pistol and began firing. Yaslowitz was mortally wounded and fell inside the attic. The marshal, whose injury was less severe, tumbled downstairs.

Officer Thomas Baitinger, 48 and others rushed into the home to rescue their colleagues. Lacy fired through the ceiling, killing Baitinger. After several additional exchanges of gunfire – Lacy was by then armed with officer Yaslowitz's .40 caliber pistol – officers were finally able to pull Yaslowitz down. It took a tactical team, an unsuccessful attempt at negotiation and the partial tear-down of the residence with heavy equipment to bring the episode to a conclusion. Lacy, who remained holed up throughout, was found dead of gunshot wounds.

What lessons can be gained from the murder of officer Crawford? Like other St. Petersburg cops he worked in a one-officer car. And that's in a city with a high crime rate – [one ranking of cities over 75,000 population](#) places it 370 worst out of 400 in serious crime, just one place short of Philadelphia and only eight shy of Newark.

Well, there are lots of arguments pro and con over one-officer units. Suffice it to say that the real reason for having them is that it provides twice the “coverage” for half the cost. Financial constraints and the apparent easing in violence has encouraged agencies everywhere to adopt the questionable practice, and by now the pattern is so entrenched that changing it is probably far-fetched.

Yet consider the downsides. First, there is the obvious peril of going one-on-one with anyone. (For a graphic example check out [Dancing With Hooligans](#).) Then there's the difficulty of trying to keep a situation contained while running license plates and record checks and communicating with one's peers. And if the unexpected happens, which in police work means frequently, a solo officer may be so in the thick of things that calling for help is impossible.

On November 7, 2010, [Riverside, California police officer Ryan Bonaminio](#) pulled over a truck that had been involved in a hit-and-run. What officer Bonaminio didn't know was that the driver, Earl Green, 44, was a multi-convicted felon on parole, and that he had just stolen the vehicle from a rental yard. Green fled on foot, with Bonaminio in pursuit. At some point Bonaminio slipped and fell. Green jumped on the officer, took away his .40 caliber Glock pistol and shot him dead. Green was subsequently arrested and charged with first-degree murder.

Officer Bonaminio's murder spawned concern about Riverside's practice of running one-officer cars. (The city is no quiet burg, earning 210th. place out of 400 on the measure referenced above.) Chief Sergio Diaz promptly came out with a blistering repartee of critics “sitting at home eating Cheetos in their underwear.” Well, while writing this piece your blogger was in his robe, sipping herbal tea. But during his

brief experience piloting a one-officer car in a small community he remembers a certain encounter that could have easily ended in tragedy. And no, he was too busy fighting to reach for the mike. (His behind was saved by a citizen.)

Officers Yaslowitz and Baitinger had plenty of law enforcement company. Yet they too lost their lives. But how could it happen? One would think that going after a violent person ensconced in an attic and probably armed is a ready-made situation for a surround and call-out, to be followed by negotiation and, if need be, the use of chemical agents. That indeed is how SWAT eventually handled it, but only after two officers had already died.

Cops are can-do people. They're also prideful. One can certainly appreciate the desire to get the job done without having to call in tactical units. Not knowing the rules of engagement in St. Petersburg, we surmise that the warrant-service team, which to all appearances worked independently, made up their tactics on the fly and wound up involving other officers beyond their level of preparation.

That's not to say that SWAT is always a perfect solution. In [Oakland: How Could it Happen?](#) we wrote of the shooting deaths of four Oakland police officers in a single day. A wanted parolee who had just shot and killed two motorcycle officers was holed up in an apartment. [A SWAT team converged on the scene.](#) After an hour a decision was made to assault the premises. Two of the first officers to enter were shot dead as the wanted man fired through interior walls.

There is really no answer short of handling every arrest of a dangerous person with extreme care. On January 20, 2011 [Miami-Dade detectives were looking for Johnny Simms](#), a 22-year old convicted drug dealer with a rap sheet for armed robbery. A notoriously violent man with tattoos depicting flames, a gun and the words "savage" and "10-20 life," Simms was wanted for the cold-blooded murder of a man he gunned down some months earlier.

Detectives went to an apartment where they knew Simms had been staying. They knocked on the door and were admitted by Simm's mother. Just then the suspect jumped into the room, gun blazing. Officer Amanda Haworth, 44 sustained a fatal head wound. Officer Roger Castillo, 41, who was standing just outside, was also stuck by a bullet and killed. Another detective came running around the complex and shot Simms dead.

One thing's for sure: if we really paid attention to experience, police tactics would be far more standardized than what presently seems to be the case. Officers wouldn't be routinely doing one-on-ones with possibly dangerous characters. Really, safety requires that we give up some efficiencies. Agencies that run one-officer cars should think it over. At a minimum they must set and enforce rules that prohibit lone-wolf foot pursuits and require that two units converge on every possibly risky contact.

Serving warrants on violent persons calls for a specialized approach, including surveillance, so that encounters take place in as safe and controlled an environment as possible. Tactical teams must either be

in charge or present. And once they become involved, deviating from normal surround and call-out practices, such as what happened in Oakland, must be strongly discouraged.

Yes, there's one more thing. Wearing ballistic vests should be mandatory, even when it's hot and muggy. In [DNA's Dandy, But What About Body Armor?](#) we bemoaned the sad state of body armor, both as to its comfort and protective capabilities. We again call for a major effort in that direction. Hopefully, someone's out there listening.