

Posted 7/26/08

WHEN COPS KILL (PART II)

Why are some officers repetitively involved in questionable shootings?

By *Julius (Jay) Wachtel*. Here are the [words](#) that lit up Ohio: “Cleveland police officer Jim Simone has an alarming record of killing people. If anyone else gunned down five people, we'd call him a serial killer.” That's how *Plain Dealer* columnist Regina Brett kicked off her July 16 piece about a 60-year old street cop who's shot at twelve people in his 35-year career and killed five, most recently an ex-con with a long rap sheet.

Here's [how that happened](#). While off duty, officer Simone was in a bank when another customer passed an “I've got a gun, give me money” note to a teller. As the robber fled Simone chased him, and when the suspect climbed into an idling truck he ordered him to freeze. According to Simone, the man reached down instead. That's when he fired. It turned out that the robber was unarmed and that the truck was his. Simone is under restricted duty while the shooting is investigated.

As one might expect, most of Cleveland, including the *Plain Dealer's* own staff, disagreed with columnist Brett. Here's how columnist [Phillip Morris](#) put it:

“There are some who wonder why Cleveland police officer Jim Simone, who has killed more civilians than possibly any officer in the city's history, is being hailed as a hero in some quarters. The answer is really quite simple. He is a hero.”

Columnist Brett has since [chatted](#) with Simone. What's his explanation for all those shootings? He cares, and he's a hard worker: “I go to work with the intention of finding some bad guys.” But this suspect didn't display a gun. Why did he shoot? Because he felt threatened: “If you put me in jeopardy -- whether that jeopardy is real or imagined -- I have to defend myself.” While not retracting her remarks, the columnist apologized for not speaking with Simone before publishing her original piece. But not to worry: as soon as he's back on the streets she'll accompany him on a ride-along!

Two-thousand fifty-four miles to the west, in sunny Inglewood, California, another cop felt threatened. *For the second time in two months* Inglewood police officer Brian Ragan [shot and killed](#) a man, this time while responding to a family disturbance in an apartment house. When Ragan and three other officers knocked a 38-year old man came to the door. He had a gun; when he allegedly raised it, Ragan fired. It now

seems that it was the wrong apartment -- the victim, a well-regarded postal worker, lived alone. The gun was registered in his name.

In May, as PoliceIssues [previously reported](#), Ragan and another officer shot and killed a passenger in a vehicle whose occupants they mistakenly associated with a shots-fired incident. Now there's a \$25 million lawsuit. Meanwhile officials [are asking](#) why he was allowed to return to the field so quickly. Expressing "sincere regret" for the latest death (she called the earlier one a "tragedy"), Police Chief Jacqueline Seabrooks explained that officer Ragan was cleared by a psychologist so there was no reason to keep him on limited duty.

And that's not all. On July 1st. other Inglewood officers [chased a known gang member](#) into an alley after witnessing a drug deal. Police claim he was noncompliant. When he allegedly reached into his waistband they fired, killing him. Apparently he too was unarmed.

It's little consolation to a dead person's family and friends that officers made an honest mistake. Are there ways to reduce the possibility of lethal errors? Here are three things to consider:

Environment matters. Although Cleveland (pop. 461,000) has four times as many residents as Inglewood (115,000), both are demographically similar, with one in four citizens living [below poverty level](#). Both cities are also plagued by gangs and violence. In 2007, according to preliminary data, Cleveland's [murder rate](#) was 20.5/100,000, while Inglewood's was 16.5 (in 2006 it was an alarming 31.16). Cops in Cleveland and Inglewood clearly have a far harder time of it than officers in Beverly Hills, where one murder means a bad year. Police behavior reflects the environment, so one can expect that Cleveland and Inglewood cops will be more likely to interpret ambiguous situations as threatening and react accordingly.

Organizations matter. In recent years Inglewood and its police department have been hit with waves of [accusations](#). Inglewood's Mayor currently faces felony conflict-of-interest charges, while several cops are under Federal investigation for accepting sexual favors from massage parlors. Seabrooks, a former Santa Monica PD captain, was hired to clean up the mess. But after three officer-involved shooting deaths in as many months, none "clean," [critics](#) complain that she's in over her head.

By and large, police officers work independently. Controlling their behavior is never easy; when departments are as rudderless as Inglewood seems to be, it's virtually impossible. In these days of police unionism it takes a strong and respected Chief to motivate officers while keeping them in line. Go too far in one direction and they'll be reluctant to act for fear of punishment; go too far in the other and you'll

have a department-full of independent contractors marching to the beat of their own drummer.

Finally, *individuals matter*. [Jim Simone's comment](#) that “fear will make you respond” was particularly revealing. Considering the situations that officers regularly face, where things are often not what they seem, they must be able to tolerate considerable risk. In fact most do; if they didn't our streets would be lined with dead citizens. An overwhelming majority serve out their careers without killing anyone. That's not an indication, as some have implied, that they're slackers. On the contrary, it's evidence that they're sufficiently skilled, levelheaded and risk-tolerant to do their jobs without needlessly taking life.

Those “supercops” that some in Cleveland seem to long for are a sure bet for trouble. Leave policing to trained, thoughtful professionals, and leave Dirty Harry for the movies.