

HOME SWEET HOME? Casting New Light on Domestic

By Sgt. T. S. Duncan

During the 10-year period from 1979 through 1988, there were 841 law enforcement officers killed in all types of cases, 69 of whom were killed during domestic disturbances. But the FBI reports that 52 officers were killed during "family quarrels" during this period. The difference between the numbers is due to cases that were precipitated by domestics but reclassified by the FBI because of ambushes or arrests. My goal was to look at all cases precipitated by a domestic disturbance; the officers involved may have been ambushed or attempting an arrest, but the type of case was always a domestic.

By definition, the word "domestic" means of or relating to the household or family. Thus, we usually envision a domestic occurring inside a residence, as the officer arrives and makes entry, contacts the combatants and attempts to restore order. Our training and experience tell us to constantly be on guard while inside the residence, and to keep the combatants out of the "danger" areas like the kitchen and bedrooms to reduce access to weapons.

As good as all these precautions may be, they are misleading—because we perceive the threat as being indoors. But most officers killed in domestics are killed out-of-doors. In fact, 74 percent of the officers killed in domestics between 1979-1988 were killed before ever getting into the residence. Our approach to these cases now takes on a whole new perspective.

Consider the time lag between when dispatch receives a complaint, and when the officers arrive on the scene. We need to realize that much can happen during this 5–10-minute period. Time is not frozen for the combatants; the disturbance continues, often intensifying, and sometimes resulting in a shooting before the first officer arrives.

If a crime has been committed or if the aggressor sees the arrival of the police as threatening, he may be outside ready to take offensive action. Thus, domestics have a very high percentage of ambushes, and even in non-ambush cases the officers are fired upon soon after arrival and contact.

Other reasons for the combatants being outside are easy to understand. Both parties usually know the police are enroute, and each wants to be the first to influence the officers with their side of the story. The victim may also have fled the residence out of fear, hoping to get a few seconds of extra protection by being outside when the police arrive; but the aggressor usually follows the victim outside.

The implication for police tactics is obvious: Our approach techniques are critical, since the risk starts as soon as we are anywhere near the scene. The basic rules of parking away from the scene, and surveying the scene as you approach, are vital. The worst thing an officer can do is park directly in front of the scene, walk up to the front door and start knocking. You should make your arrival as unobtrusive and as unexpected as possible.

Many would guess the arrest phase is the most dangerous phase of handling a domestic, but once again we are surprised. Eighty-seven percent of the officers killed in domestics were killed before even getting to the arrest phase.

Specifically, 41 percent were killed on the arrival/approach phase. Many of these killings were ambushes, which explains why so many occurred outside. Of the officers killed in domestics, 23 percent were ambushed—of those killed in all types of circumstances, only 9 percent.

The emotional content of a domestic runs especially high, the assailant having a much different motivation: He is seeking revenge—or at the very least emotional satisfaction—and often loses complete control prior to the officer's arrival. If the assailant is in an emotional rage, he lacks the self-control found in other perpetrators; and the bottom line is he just doesn't care what happens.

Once the officer arrives and finds the combatants, the contact phase, 46 percent of the officers were killed. Many of these killings occurred outside soon after contact was made.

Almost 90 percent of officer deaths in domestics occurred before the arrest phase, which seems to demonstrate that the assailant was out of control and beyond being manageable. This supports the "pro-arrest" philosophy as a way of improving officer safety. When a combative subject has committed -an offense, it's time to go to jail. You owe it to yourself, and you owe it to the victim, or potential victim.

Only 10 percent of the officers killed in domestics were killed during the arrest phase. While it is clear that the time leading up to the arrest is the most dangerous, domestics can be difficult because a hostile victim may assault an officer during an arrest. Therefore, should an officer move to make an arrest, it is important to keep the victim in view as much as possible. The best way to do this is to keep the assailant between you and the victim. This way, if the victim becomes hostile (especially if they are armed), you have some protection with assailant obstructing the victim's path to you.

Departure from the scene of a domestic is generally not a dangerous time. Only 3 percent of the officers killed in domestics were attacked during this stage. One indicator of trouble when departing is if one of the combatants is still highly emotional and angry with the officers. In one case, the subject of the complaint—who had left prior to the officer's arrival—returned and ambushed the officer while he sat in his car doing paperwork. When it's time to leave, leave. Remaining at the scene only increases your chances of being victimized.

Weapons. Since about half the homes in the United States contain at least one firearm, the danger from these weapons is very real in domestics. Of the 69 officer deaths in this study, 68 involved firearms and one officer was killed with a knife. Only 35 percent of the assailants in these cases used handguns—21 percent less than the percentage of handguns used to kill officers in other types of cases.

In domestics, officers were killed with long guns, particularly rifles, at twice the rate they were in other cases (forty-nine percent versus only twenty-four percent in other cases). The increased use of long guns in residences is understandable, since few offenders will carry a firearm on the street that is not easily concealed.

Of the 10 officers killed indoors during domestics over the past 10 years, eight were killed with their own weapons. Proximity to the combatants becomes of major concern; and when it comes to weapons retention, a greater distance between officers and combatants means a better chance of survival.

Shooting Aspects. It appears that many of the officer-involved shootings occur within a short period of time – perhaps two minutes – after the officer arrives on the scene. The suddenness of the attack seems to catch many officers off guard because only 17 percent were able to return fire. Fifty-seven percent of the officers killed were assisted by other officers at the time of the shooting, and in many cases, it was the other officers who were responsible for returning fatal fire at the assailant.

The necessity of assessing and acting on a case quickly is clear. Patience may be a virtue, but in a deteriorating domestic, control of the combatants is needed immediately. When a combative subject

continues to test the officer, second warnings only give that combatant time and opportunity. Making an arrest takes away both.

Other Victims. In 17 percent of the domestics in which officers were killed, someone else was also murdered; and in about an equal number of cases someone else was also shot. Most of the other victims were killed after the officer arrived, and most were female.

One would think once an officer is killed, the assailant would find it easy to continue to shoot others, but this doesn't happen. This may be due to the psychological principle of transference. The assailant builds up a tremendous amount of anger and frustration prior to the officer's arrival, but because he still has affection for the complainant, he is prevented from following through and committing a murder. However, all those pent-up emotions have an outlet when the officer arrives. The assailant couldn't care less what happens to the officer, so instead of releasing his anger on a loved one, he directs his frustrations toward a stranger—the police officer.

The emotional recklessness of subjects in a domestic is further demonstrated by evidence that assaults involving strangers are less likely to result in injuries than assaults involving non-strangers. This brings new meaning to the old saying, “you only hurt the ones you love.”

Assailants. A basic tenet of police work is that you can't trust anybody. This is particularly true in domestics, because of the number of false or exaggerated reports and the hostile victims that are sometimes encountered. Yet, even with this in mind, during the past 10 years not one police officer was killed by a female during a domestic disturbance...

There are a variety of reasons for the predominance of male assailants; one of which is that men are simply more likely to own and be experienced with firearms. Even early on in life, boys play with imitation guns.

The implications are obvious. During a domestic disturbance, males are a much greater threat to the police than females, and we need to adapt our tactics accordingly. The primary threats in these cases are males and firearms, not females.

Offender disposition. We already know how emotional these cases can become, and their emotional intensity is why they are often so violent and so hard to prevent. The key to survival is an understanding of how deeply emotional the assailants can become, and that as they become more emotional, we have a slimmer chance of reasoning with or coercing them. We need not agree with or even understand why the assailant is so emotionally violent, but it is essential to realize that their outrage is enough that they don't even care what happens to themselves. And an assailant who doesn't care about his survival will be more violently aggressive.

Those who kill officers are 2 times more likely to commit suicide than assailants in other types of cases. Combined with the number of assailants killed at the scene, we find that 45 percent of all combatants who kill police officers during a domestic, also die at the scene.

The uncontrollable rage, frustration and combativeness of these assailants is obvious. The important thing for us to remember is that these uncontrollable emotions do exist and there is little we can do to prevent or restrict them once they are displayed.

Summary. Having all this knowledge on domestics and acting on it are not the same thing. There is a real danger of becoming complacent with domestics, because so many of them result in no substantial police action. The information contained here can allow every officer to handle domestics in a safer manner by modifying their tactics to meet the real threats.

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