

Shoot! Don't Shoot!

Written by Earl Brechlin

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It is perhaps the most important decision a police officer will ever make – when to shoot and when not to shoot.

Helping officers learn how to handle deadly force situations when they are themselves in great peril is the aim of Simunitions training, in which police participate in scenarios carrying their own guns modified to shoot special paintball-type bullets. Simunitions training is used by the U.S. military and police departments around the country and the world. While the ammunition may not be lethal, the scenarios are designed to mimic the emotional intensity of real life-or death situations.

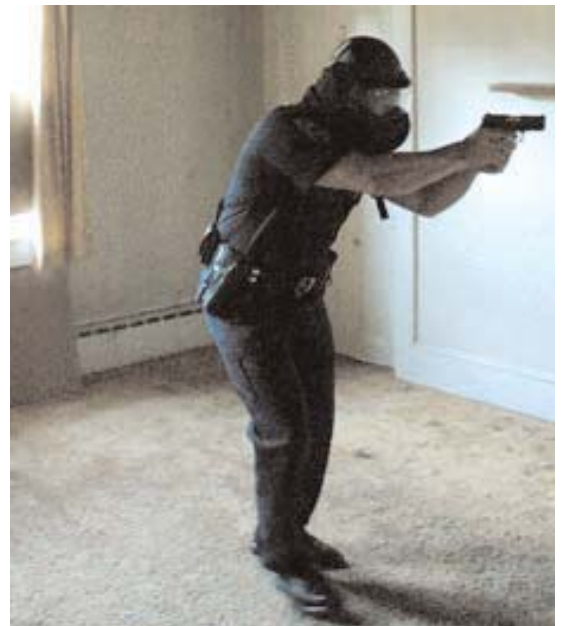


Actors simulate a police officer taken hostage.

PHOTO BY EARL BRECHLIN

On Saturday, three Simunitions instructors – officers David Kearns and Tim Bland of the Bar Harbor Police Department and Joe Wardwell of the Mount Desert Police Department – conducted training in a vacant house on Route 102 in Town Hill. More than a dozen officers from area law enforcement agencies, including Bar Harbor Harbormaster Charlie Phippen and rangers from Acadia National Park, participated.

First and foremost on everyone's mind is safety. No unmodified weapons are allowed into the training space. Windows are covered with cardboard to reduce the possibility of broken glass. The darkened interior of the empty farmhouse lent an ominous air to scenarios. Only guns that can fire paintball rounds can be used, loaded or unloaded. Participants, actors, observers and referees all wear full helmets and face shields, bulletproof or safety vests and special collars.



Officer Eric McGlaughlin prepares to fire at a man holding a hostage.

PHOTO BY EARL BRECHLIN

"Safety is the top priority," Officer Wardwell said.

The first scenario officers were faced with Saturday was a large, mentally disturbed man who was threatening suicide. A few moments after police get into the house, the man grabs a large military knife and begins gesturing wildly. The preferred course of action for police is to step back to give plenty of distance from the subject, draw their weapon and order the man to comply with their orders. The man is then told to drop the knife, and stand against the wall so he can be handcuffed. Use of the command voice, the shouting of orders, is part of the recommended solution.

The second scenario involves checking on an officer who responded to a domestic violence complaint who has not been reachable on his radio for 15 minutes. Arriving at the house, the second officer hears shouting from inside. In a corner bedroom, a suspect is holding the first officer hostage, a gun to his head. The preferred course of action is to take a quick, clear shot at the perpetrator.

The “Red Man” scenario was also run on Saturday. The name comes from the complicated red padded suit with face guard and helmet worn by an actor. His job is to surprise a responding officer and wrestle with him in an attempt to get his gun.

In a run-through on Saturday, Officer Eric McGlaughlin of the Bar Harbor Police Department responded perfectly. He stepped back when confronted by the distraught man, played by Lou Hall, aimed his weapon, and shouted at him to comply with his orders. The subject was quickly handcuffed.

In the hostage situation, Officer McGlaughlin drew his weapon, ordered the suspect, played by Bill Ballah, to drop his, and then, in just a few seconds, quickly took a shot, taking the hostage taker out. The hostage, played by Chris Sylvester, was not harmed.

The biggest adrenaline rush came during the “Red Man” scenario. As soon as Officer McGlaughlin opened a door to a bedroom in the house, he was rushed by Shawn Farrar, who stands nearly a foot taller and outweighs him by at least 50 pounds. They wrestled for a few seconds before falling to the floor, with Officer McLaughlin quickly subduing the larger man.

“That was wild,” Officer McGlaughlin commented.

Mount Desert police plan to conduct another round of Simunition training later this fall.

Note: Editor Earl Brechlin took the Simunitions training on Saturday. He was not able to convince the distraught man in the first scenario to come quietly although he did get him to drop the knife. He shot the hostage taker without injury to the hostage in the second scenario.



Officer Shawn Farrar as the “Red Man.”—
PHOTO BY EARL BRECHLIN



Even though they are low power, a paintball round sticks out of one of the training officers’ bulletproof vests.—PHOTO BY EARL BRECHLIN