

The value of CCW 'first responders' in active shooter situations

LE and government need to treat CCW holders as a valuable, volunteer resource and educate, coordinate and actively work with them

"Terrorism in America" the banner headlines blare.

The attacks of Paris, France, San Bernardino, California and elsewhere have galvanized the world, angered many and motivated some to start looking at their own vulnerability and preparation. The responses I hear from a wide variety of people are predictable and most have not ever taken the time to really look at the big picture before they start talking.

While active shooters are not a new phenomenon, the terrorist active shooter (TAS) in the U.S. may well be the next phase of an escalating worldwide strategy. You must be switched on and mentally prepared for the differences between a TAS and what we have dealt with before.

The "typical" active shooter scenario involves a lone gunman intent on revenge for whatever slights or misdeeds he feels justifies killing people. Our response is to go after the shooter ASAP and usually, they kill themselves at the first sign of armed response.

The terrorist active shooter, on the other hand, is ideologically driven. He sees himself as a martyr for a cause greater than himself. His purpose is to fulfill a mission and create terror in the hearts of the enemy. He will most likely not kill himself right off when the good guys show up and will more than likely do his best to kill as many people as he can which includes all who come after him.

He may be working in concert with others. I can envision him coming at you with a long gun, full magazine and body armor and not caring whether he lives or dies, as long as he takes you with him. He will have trained and prepared himself for the mission for weeks, months or even years ahead of time. He will have been coached, mentored, supported and encouraged in his path to martyrdom and the great beyond.

Now I ask, what is your mindset compared to his? What are you prepared to do and what are you prepared to sacrifice?

I came up with a list of a 15 questions that came to mind in about 10 minutes. This is not an inclusive list. I have a lot more but these will do for a start. Answer honestly. Use them to start coming up with your own honest answers and to make choices.

- 1. What is your personal code of ethics and conduct? What or whom do you believe in, stand for and are willing to risk your life and, if necessary, die for?**
- 2. Based on your answers to question #1; what is your priority of life value system and where do you rank yourself, your family and others? Is it the same when you are "off duty" or only when you are "on duty"? Does it apply to society in general or just you and your peer or cultural group?**
- 3. Are you willing to go? Do you feel prepared to approach and attack a terrorist killer armed with a long gun using just your CCW weapon?**
- 4. Would you enter a room where the door is closed, with only your CCW weapon, if a terrorist is inside actively shooting people you did not know?**
- 5. What do you think it will take to prepare you to confront a terrorist who is not afraid to die for his cause and is more than willing to kill you without mercy?**

6. What are the top five things you need to do to prepare for a terrorist threat? List them in priority of importance.
7. Do you actually carry a CCW weapon most places you go or only when you go to certain places?
8. If so, what kind of weapon do you carry? How did you make your weapon choice?
9. How much ammo do you carry besides what is in your weapon? How many rounds total?
10. What kind of firearms training have you done? Qualification does not count as training.
11. How often do you shoot and what kind of practice or competition do you do?
12. Do you think the CCW weapon and ammo you currently own and carry is adequate to the task of dealing with a terrorist armed with a long gun and body armor? If so, what leads you to believe it? If not, why not?
13. Do you feel you have a duty to protect others or just yourself, family and friends?
14. Do you feel that you only have a duty to defend others when you are "on the clock" or being compensated for it?
15. How good do you think you are? Have you ever had your skill actually measured? If so, how was it measured? Have you ever been measured against the best in the world for comparison to really find out?

In taking on the terrorist active shooter, it is impossible for the police to be everywhere at once. There is a deadly void between the start of an incident and the arrival of LE first responders. If people are being killed and LE is not there, it is unacceptable to me to run, hide or wait for LE to get there if I have the will, the means and the training to do something about it.

The concept of having CCW "first responders" fill that void has been considered before. On the one hand, it is an option to fill the void when LE response is diverted or delayed. But, there are many who are not for it. CCW holders are not part of an organized force, have widely varying training, belief and value systems and worse, do not have a recognized uniform and have limited communication and coordination with other possible CCW and LE responders on scene.

A lack of knowledge, experience, judgment, emotional control or proper training may also lead to friendly-fire incidents where people don't look "beyond the gun" at the behavior of the individual holding the gun before they open fire.

And I am not just talking CCW carriers; I am talking LE responders as well.

This possibility of friendly-fire incidents goes up for the folks who want to run back to their car and grab their long gun and other gear and return to the fray. Long guns can be a very good thing. They have better terminal ballistics than common defensive handgun calibers, they are easier to shoot and you can shoot more accurately at longer ranges. They also have more intimidation value than a handgun.

Now think about it, you have a terrorist with a long gun and body armor on the loose and you show up, armed with a long gun, body armor and chest rig without a uniform. No one else really knows you are a "good guy." People may not think twice before shooting you.

Ditto for the dude carrying his handgun at the ready while sporting the "suicide bomber" look with his ceramic armor poorly disguised under some sort of hastily thrown on over garment. And no, putting the words "good guy" on your vest panel is not going to convince anyone.

This also creates more problems for law enforcement trying to sort out the good guys with guns vs. bad guys with guns when they arrive on scene. All this can cause needless delays and allow the terrorists to kill more people while it is being sorted out.

Now What?

In my opinion, short of having armed guards or law enforcement in every possible place where a terrorist might show up, CCW remains the only viable option we have to protect our space. What's more, they are going to do it whether local, state, federal government or LE want them to or not. The right of self-protection cannot be ignored or slighted.

Further, neither LE nor government is going to manage this movement by trying to restrict it. I have long held the belief that performance does not wear a uniform and that courage resides in the individual. You do not have to be a cop, military spec ops or have secret mall ninja training to make a difference. I applaud anyone who is willing to be proactive and risk their life to protect others.

The best option, in my mind, is for LE and government to treat CCW holders as a valuable, volunteer resource and educate, coordinate and actively work with them as part of an overall response plan and not treat them as a necessary evil. This is going to take a change in attitude, or if necessary, leadership, to get a meaningful, coordinated response plan going and not just give it lip service.

Disdain, sarcasm or thinly veiled contempt by certain government and LE types will have a predictable backlash. If you are being irresponsible in public, people will ignore you and come up with their own solutions. Contrary to popular belief in certain circles; people really can solve their own problems when left to their own devices without government or LE intervention. Treat them with respect. They are volunteers who are willing to risk their lives to protect others. You don't boss them around and you don't treat them like crap.

Enter CCW

Going after a terrorist active shooter is a significant step up in threat level from simple carry for self-protection. Especially if the TAS is armed with a long gun, has body armor and is committed to giving their life for their cause. The risk of dying or being permanently maimed is far greater.

I find that most CCW I have spoken with say they are willing to take on that role. However, when putting together my active shooter for CCW program, I kept getting a lot of requests for long gun training, body armor selection and other gear questions.

I am going to introduce a hypothetical situation. You are in a crowded mall on a Saturday afternoon. Your vehicle is parked in the parking lot 100 yards away. In it lie your long gun, body armor, chest rig and helmet. You have a Glock 19 CCW handgun and two spare magazines with you. No body armor as it is hot out that day and you opted out of wearing it. Fifty yards in the opposite direction an active shooter with a long gun starts shooting into a group of people. BANG, BANG, BANG, BANG, BANG. With each round being fired, people are being shot. Visualize this situation as I have laid it out. You don't get to change the scenario to fit your solution.

Decision time.

Let's use my Tactical Decision Equation™ and see what you come up with.

Risk vs. Need + Resources Available = Decision Time

- Risk is the risk of each option you have available to you. From lowest to highest.
- Need is the need of the situation — i.e. what is your mission?
- Time is either working for you or against you. The longer you take, the longer it takes to complete your mission or the more people die.
- Resources Available means what do you have to work with that can be brought to bear to complete your mission on time.

This is where you find out what your priorities, values and beliefs really are. Your choices and actions reflect them.

This is where I get the split decision from people; both CCW and LE. I have the ones telling me how much better it would be to run back to the car and get the long gun and armor because the long gun has much better energy and accuracy than the handgun. Then the others will say that you need to go after the gunman ASAP because there is no time to run back and get the other gear.

Will vs. Skill

I can remember during my years in law enforcement and after how different people responded to different life threatening, dangerous, violent or potentially violent situations. Many times I have seen officers and others mill around when direct action clearly needed to happen. And these were people that outwardly were capable in regards to training and performance. Yet, when things got sticky, they hesitated.

In any given situation, like the one I outlined earlier, there will be moments where you have to make a choice that can affect your personal well-being in a negative way. It will not be your skill that makes your choice for you, it will be your will. Your will is what "gets you through the door" so to speak. Your skill, hopefully, helps you succeed and get back out again. Your will is made up of your conscious and subconscious mind and your self-image. Your commitment to your values and your willingness to risk your life for them will be reflected by your decisions and actions.

The "Hunter" vs. the "Bunker" Mentality

The bunker mentality reflects a desire to stay safe and protected. "I'm OK right here and if that bad guy comes, I am ready for him." There are times when staying in a sheltered, protected spot makes sense.

But when people are being killed nearby and you have the tools, the opportunity and whatever skill you possess and say you want to make a difference or protect society, then staying in the bunker mindset and remaining where it is safe for you is not going to help others. You have to make a choice.

Going after a TAS requires a hunter mindset. The hunter mindset is proactive. It reflects a willingness to "go to the fight" instead of waiting for the fight to come to you.

And this is where it gets sticky. When I talk about the hunter mindset people invariably say to me, "I need more training." I then ask, "What training do you need to have a hunter mindset?"

The hunter mindset is a life choice based on values and how you prioritize and live them. You strengthen the mindset by defining your values and committing to them even at risk to your own life. Then you live them in your everyday life as part of who you are. In the end, how you respond will reflect your value and priorities.

Confidence in yourself and your abilities is part of your self-image and will influence your choices. However, you can do all the training you want. It is different when you have to actually go into harm's way and your "moment of truth" arrives. For me, when I was full time law enforcement, most times I didn't think much about the dangers, I just went into action. I made my choices long before.

Sometimes, when things get a bit hairy and you feel more vulnerable, leaving cover and moving out into the open feels like pushing against an invisible wall of gelatin. You have to force yourself to act and move through it. Then, once in action, it gets easier. Staying out in the open and exposed while responding is also no fun. Commitment to mission burns through doubt, hesitation and fear.

Remember, courage is doing what you have to do when you feel fear.

By making conscious decisions now of what you are going to do, living your values and then doing it when it counts, you can develop the hunter mindset. Decide now. Live your values in your everyday life. Stop posting on Facebook about your readiness to respond. Shut up and live it.

Training

I won't get into too much detail as far as training goes. I do this for a living and there are specific things that must be trained thoroughly that I reserve for students. I am a huge believer in training to perform under pressure when it counts. After mindset, high performance, reactive shooting training is the single best thing you can do to prepare your skills for an active shooter. Tactics and strategies need to be trained as well. Movement, cover, approach and decision making are all areas of concern that I deal with in training. However, if you can't shoot well, who cares how "tactical" you are?

Measurement

I also believe in objective measurement of skill. When someone tells me they are a "good shot" I ask the question: "Compared to whom?" If you think every bad guy is a buffoon with a gun you might want to review history a bit. I measure people objectively and honestly. People are betting their lives on their skill level. If you are going up against a long gun with your handgun, you had better be squared away. Being good is only relative to the skill level of the opposition and what weapon they are armed with.

Guns, Gear and Other Thoughts

Guns and gear are where I find the majority of people talking. What bullet? Caliber? Round count? Body armor? Holster? They spend endless time on an issue that takes up less than 15 percent of the equation.

Here are some thoughts in no particular order.

- "Low profile" is the way to go in my opinion. Let the TAS worry about getting shot to death, suddenly and unexpectedly by a CCW holder. This is a form of terror I can endorse.
- Carrying concealed under clothing is only a part of this. Your behavior, mode of dress and grooming and how you move and communicate can have a direct bearing on your survivability in a conflict.

- Have a first round hit mentality. Just because your gun holds 18 rounds does not mean you will have 18 chances to get it done.
- In terminal ballistics, placement, penetration and permanent wound channel diameter matter. From any angle you can take the shot, you have to place it well and it has to go deep enough and do enough damage to stop the threat. Most ballistic gelatin tests are done at 10 feet. You may need to shoot at 50 yards or more. Is your selection capable of putting a man down for the count at extended ranges?
- Are your sights and trigger adequate for making good hits rapidly at extended ranges?
- Can you make head shots or hit other parts of the body if the TAS is wearing body armor?
- Is your gun sighted in precisely for the ammo you are using? At what distance?
- What testing have you personally done with your ammo and gun selection? Ever gone hunting with it for hogs or similar game? There are good rounds out there. However, reality can be a long way from controlled gelatin testing. Test it yourself.
- If you don't have the courage to get close to the enemy, your gear doesn't matter one bit. Reaffirm your commitment to your values often. Refresh as needed. Tell no one.
- If you carry for convenience and you have to face a bad guy with a long gun with your itty bitty pocket gun than I say "it sucks to be you." Your choice to protect others means you need gear that is up to the task.
- Body armor to me is your internal core strength of character that resists all attempts to intimidate you and allows you to function as the person you truly want to be. If you want to wear ceramic plates every day that is your choice.

At some point, you will not be wearing the armor, your long gun will not be conveniently located and your go bag or day pack didn't make it with you that day. Do you still have the guts to get it done with your CCW weapon anyway?

An active, coordinated response to a TAS incident is vital to protecting the public. Government and LE are part of the response plan. CCW are also a factor in the response and I recommend they be included as a necessary part of any response strategy. Treat them as a valuable, volunteer resource and not a necessary evil. They will most likely be the "first responders" to a TAS incident in areas where CCW or open carry is legal. This requires a change of mindset, strategy and training to prevail.

About the author

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