



Written by [C. Mitchell Shaw](#) on September 21, 2015

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Police Perspective

In 1992, patrolman John Slater of the Henrico County, Virginia, Police Department was working a midnight shift when he made a traffic stop in the city of Richmond. In the car were two men. Something in their behavior seemed suspicious, so after writing the driver a ticket, Slater asked for permission to search the car. The driver said it would be all right. As Slater's backup approached the passenger side door, Slater looked up just for a moment. As he looked back into the car, his flashlight illuminated the passenger reaching under his shirt for a gun.



Slater instinctively drew his sidearm. As he did, the passenger pulled the gearshift into drive and yelled for the driver to go. With his left hand, which was still holding the flashlight, Slater reached into the car and pushed the gearshift back into park. But the driver and passenger both put their weight into pulling the gearshift back into drive, trapping Slater's hand. As the car pulled onto the road and began to accelerate, Slater was snatched off his feet and found himself being dragged beside the car.

It had only been a split second since he had looked up at his backup. In that split second, everything had changed. What began as a routine traffic stop was now a life-and-death struggle as Slater was pulled along beside the car for 150 feet. Because both the driver and the passenger were holding his hand against the gearshift, Slater could not pull free as the car continued to speed up. Over and over, he yelled for the driver to stop. As he told *The New American*, "Fortunately, there were no cars on the opposite side of the road. If that had been the case, it would have sheared me off."

Because his life was in danger, Slater — who still had his sidearm in his right hand — "fired until [his] gun was dry," hitting both men in the car. Only then was he able to break free. "I pushed myself away from the car," Slater said, adding that because he did not know how much damage he had done, and because he knew the passenger was armed, "I had to take my chances with the street." When the car finally came to a stop, Slater and his backup approached the car. One man was injured. The other was dead. Both were armed.

Often horrific interactions with citizens happen just that fast, and the potential for imminent violence is a fact that police officers never forget and that citizens don't generally understand — along with the incredible restraint that officers exercise on a daily basis and the effects that police work can have on officers' personal lives.

Slater began his career in law enforcement as a state game warden in 1983. He joined the Henrico County Police Department in 1989 and worked there until retiring in May of 2015. During that time, he was promoted to sergeant, with up to 14 officers reporting to him. Even as a supervisor, Slater never lost his patrolman's spirit. He often went on patrol with his officers.



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After the events of that fateful midnight shift in 1992, Slater did briefly consider leaving the job. He knows what most will never know: the weight of having taken a life. It impacted him as a person. It impacted his family. He called it “a very difficult thing that changes one’s definition of normal,” adding, “It’s something that — having been down that road — I wouldn’t wish on anyone.”

Slater also says the very nature of the job is something that has “a cost.” As he put it:

There is a cost to doing this. The majority of police officers, on a day-in day-out basis, especially in urban and suburban law enforcement, deal with what I would characterize as the underbelly of society. I would go so far as to say that it is impossible to deal with the criminal element, that oftentimes is intent on inflicting harm on someone or will do whatever they need to do to get away — including killing you — it’s impossible to deal with that on a day-in day-out basis and not have it have some effect on [you as a] person.

Thankfully, Slater did not leave his chosen career. Though suffering from depression for a while, his family and his faith helped him through it. He said, “I decided that I did not want this to become my identity and I pulled myself up.” His wife continued to support him, but the shooting was a turning point for her, as well. The dangers of police work — which had been ethereal — became real to her.

In the following weeks and months, there were visits to see doctors and counselors. There was a departmental investigation and, as per state law, a criminal investigation to determine whether Slater had acted appropriately. He was cleared by both investigations and returned to work.

Slater’s story is significant not because it is abnormal, but because it reminds those of us who are not in law enforcement that police officers are real people with real families and that they have real struggles dealing with things that most of us will never experience. True, few police officers and deputies will ever fire their sidearms in the line of duty and fewer will ever take a life. But as Slater points out, many of them do deal on a day-to-day basis with a criminal element of society, which lacks the morality that keeps the rest of us in check. In the absence of that moral check, it is good that there are police officers and sheriff’s deputies willing to stand in the gap.

Winneconne is a village in Winnebago County, Wisconsin, and is about as far removed from the metropolitan environment of Richmond, Virginia, as one can get. The population of the village is less than 2,400 and officers there, such as Ben Sauriol (shown in photo at top), often depend on neighboring towns, villages, and counties for their backup. While Winneconne does not have the gang problems and violent crime of a big city, officers there still face some pretty intense situations that call for level heads and good training.

Officer Ben Sauriol, who has been at Winneconne for 12 of his 15 years in law enforcement, says officers in his area often know as friends and neighbors the people they interact with professionally. They see these people during work hours and during the rest of the week. They go to church with them. They see them at the grocery store. Their kids go to school together. It is important to maintain that “neighborliness” both for the job’s sake and for the community’s sake.

The effectiveness of the training that officers in his department receive can be witnessed during a “welfare check,” in which officers are called to a location to check on someone’s well-being, Sauriol related to *The New American*. On one particular call, things escalated very quickly, and Sauriol’s training and level head kept the situation under control. When he arrived at the location of the call and approached the man he was there to check on, he could tell something wasn’t right.



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“He was in the backyard of his brother’s house. His parents called him in [to the police] because he has post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) — he’s former military — and he had been drinking,” Sauriol said, adding, “He was quite upset about a few things and his parents couldn’t calm him down. They called the police because they were concerned for his safety.”

When Sauriol asked if everything was OK, the man gave him “a thousand yard stare and just said, ‘no,’” Sauriol said. When Sauriol asked the man if he wanted to hurt himself, he said he did. The man then backed up to a detached garage and reached up to the eave of the roof with his left hand. When he brought his hand back down, he was holding a gun case — the type that holds a handgun. “I told him several times to drop the case and he was giving me that look and he said ‘no.’ At this point, I had my Taser on him and I told him, ‘If you don’t drop the case I’m going to have to Tase you,’” Sauriol said. Instead of dropping the case, the man turned his back on Sauriol and reached with his right hand to open the case. Sauriol Tased him, and when he fell, he dropped the case. A .45-caliber pistol fell out.

While lying on the ground, the PTSD-fueled former soldier continued to reach for the gun despite Sauriol’s warnings that unless he stopped, Sauriol would have to shock him again. After one more jolt of a few thousand volts, he finally gave up and was taken into custody. When the handgun was examined, it was found to be fully loaded with a round already chambered.

When asked why he chose his Taser instead of his sidearm, Sauriol said,

Because I didn’t see the gun in there and until you see an actual weapon — now granted, I knew there was most likely a gun in there — but until you see it, you can’t assume. Imagine if I would have shot him, and then there was not a gun in there. What would that have looked like? So you have to show great restraint until you actually have a situation where you are in great danger of death or serious bodily harm.

When asked if he had been afraid for his safety during the ordeal, Sauriol said, “No. I just relied on my training.” His backup on that call was Officer Luke Luther from neighboring Omro, Wisconsin. Omro has a population of about 3,500, and the departments often provide backup for each other. Luther says there are times when he is concerned for his safety, but it doesn’t keep him from doing his job. He also says his training is a great comfort in that regard, because he believes that he is prepared to handle situations as they arise.

So how do these officers view the balance between doing their jobs and making sure people’s rights are not abused? Officer Sauriol said there is no question there; rights come first:

Our job is not to infringe on people’s rights; a law enforcement officer’s job is actually to protect people’s rights. If we pull someone over for a valid, lawful stop, it is not our job to push the envelope and try to search the car to see if they have anything illegal in the car. I’ve always said the ends don’t justify the means and the process matters. We take an oath to defend and uphold the Constitution and it’s our responsibility — as law-enforcement officers — to make sure we understand what that oath means. The Fourth Amendment is the main amendment we deal with in our jobs — dealing with unreasonable searches and seizures — and if we infringe on somebody’s rights because of drugs or whatever, yeah you might get the drugs off the street or the illegal weapons off the street, but you need to do so in the proper manner. And if you don’t do it in the proper manner, then you do yourself an injustice, you do the community an injustice, and you’re quite frankly doing the badge an injustice because you’re not upholding the principles of the Constitution.



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Luther said, “In many of our training sessions, we cover constitutional law and training, and there are many situations where in the back of my mind I know there’s more than meets the eye, but I know I can’t go there because I don’t have the right to trump someone else’s rights. I take that seriously, and I believe all of our officers take that seriously.”

Sergeant Slater agreed. He said that on many occasions he has stopped cars along Interstate 95 — a known drug corridor through Richmond — and just *known*, because of his experience, that there were drugs in the car, but had no proof. He has asked if he can search these cars and had the drivers refuse. His response? Give the driver the ticket for the offense that caused the stop and send him on his way. “I know I allowed drugs to stay on the street,” he said, “but if the alternative is to violate the Constitution and people’s rights, it’s not worth it.”

Deputy Chief of Police Tracy Basterrechea in Meridian, Idaho, near Boise, has been in law enforcement for 20 years and has spent all of that time at Meridian. He started out as a patrolman and worked his way up through the ranks. As Sergeant Slater did until he retired, Basterrechea goes out on patrol. He sees the people and the way they interact with his officers, and he is careful to communicate a message of police protecting people’s rights, because as he says, the power to police “comes from the citizenry.”

One of the things our Founding Fathers did is that they abdicated a lot of control to [local] police and that power comes from the citizenry. And we will stop being the police when the citizens tell us, “We’re not going to allow you to police us anymore.” The way to [maintain that relationship] is to be professional and realize the Constitution applies to everybody and that the Constitution is what everything the police do is derived from.

As the second largest city in Idaho with a population of about 85,000 people, Meridian has a good mix of people. And it has its crime, but Basterrechea says police work is so much more than just going out and arresting the bad guys. “We are public servants who are problem solvers,” he said, adding, “The vast majority of work we do really isn’t enforcement.” When asked for an example of the non-enforcement service provided by Meridian’s officers, Basterrechea couldn’t give just one:

We’ve had officers go on shoplifting calls and the store owner is demanding that this female is to be arrested or at least cited. And she was stealing baby food to feed her kids because they had no food. And I know of an officer who wrote the citation because the shop owner demanded it but then the officer paid for the food because she had no food at home.

We’ve had officers who have gone to calls to check on the welfare of kids and realize there’s hardly any food in the house and have gone — and with their own money — bought groceries and gone back and put food in the house. Officers who have bought gas for people when they’ve run out of gas, changed tires on the side of the road, I mean they do this every day and they don’t ever come back and say, “Hey, you know what I did?” We usually find out about it much later when somebody picks up the phone and calls us and then the officer’s embarrassed. Because they didn’t do it for the recognition.

On the other side of Idaho, in the sparsely populated Adams County, Chris Green works as a sergeant for the Adams County Sheriff’s Office in the same community where he grew up. The people he polices are his neighbors, his high-school teachers, and his boyhood friends. “You get to know the people here so you get a good rapport with everybody and I try to treat everybody with the respect I want from them,” he told *The New American*. He recognizes that encounters with police are not usually positive events. He said, “Usually when we run into somebody they’re having their worst day of their lives. We



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are not there to be bullies, we're just there to do our job. We're people just like you."

Where protecting citizens' rights is concerned, Green says he thinks it is an important part of all police work. There are times when officers need to remember that, "just because you can do something, it doesn't mean you should. If there's a fine line, I'd rather not step on it."

But are Slater, Sauriol, Luther, Basterrechea, and Green anomalies, or do most police care about people and the Constitution? What about all the YouTube videos of police officers abusing, assaulting, and violating people?

Slater said there were many occasions where citizens would use a smartphone to video what was happening with police. He said, "I would approach them and identify myself and give my badge number and tell them that I was glad to see what they were doing. I'd tell them, 'You have every right to do this. I'm glad you're doing it. If you don't exercise this right, you may lose it.' Most of the time, they would put the phone away, which isn't what I wanted, but they aren't going to get a bunch of hits on their video if someone isn't getting their rights violated."

Slater makes a real point there. How reliable is the perception that people draw from the videos of police brutality and heavy handedness? Are those videos an accurate reflection of day-to-day reality, or are they just the extreme exception that get shown simply because it is extreme. How many YouTube videos could be made of officers unlocking cars or changing tires for people, or searching for lost children, or spending their own money buying groceries for families in need?

Because the narrative is so skewed — particularly in the post-Ferguson world — there is the very real danger that police officers are second-guessing themselves at times when milliseconds may mean the officer is "the second one to pull the trigger," as Slater put it. He said in his last few months before retiring in May 2015, he had officers under his command who told him their reflexes and reactions were slower because they feared being accused of acting wrongly. Even though they are following department policies and doing their jobs properly, they do have concerns that they could be the next leading story because of either a misunderstanding or a false accusation. Or both.

Sergeant Green says he believes the Ferguson factor is creating an officer safety issue. He said the deputies who report to him have told him they are concerned about being accused of using too much force and that it causes them to question themselves before using force even when it may be needed.

Officer Luther said in the aftermath of Ferguson, he feels like "a lot of people may have jumped to conclusions before all the facts were known. A lot of them believed 'facts' that weren't actually facts. It definitely makes me think a little more, and it might slow me down in certain things." He was quick to add that his community — because it is smaller and the police department has such a "stake in the community" — would hopefully react differently. "I would think that the people here wouldn't overreact without all the facts if something were to happen," he said.

Basterrechea said he has discussed this issue with his command staff and the officers in Meridian. His message to them? "You have to do your job. The rest will sort itself out. If you are doing things the right way for the right reasons, we're going to back you. We understand that video is sometimes edited. When you see the whole video, from the police officer's perspective, it can change everything." That is one reason his department has body cameras for its officers.

As he points out, "You have to try to get the [complete] information out first because when the



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misinformation gets out, that's the information that sticks. That is what happened in the Ferguson shooting. The misinformation got out and was the first thing people saw and so it became 'the Gospel.'"

Basterrechea knows what it is like to be put in a bad place with few options. Years ago, while serving a search warrant, he had to draw his weapon when he saw one of the men in the house walking toward a shotgun. After ordering the man to stop, Basterrechea drew his weapon and continued to tell him to stop. The man did eventually stop and no shots were fired, but Basterrechea said that in that moment, "I was just thinking, 'Please don't grab that shotgun. Please don't make me do something I don't want to do.' Because no officer wants to take someone's life." It may be a good thing he didn't hesitate to draw his weapon that day, since his action may have saved lives — his own and those of his fellow officers on the scene.





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Hopefully as more and more people realize that most police officers and deputies are not villains but fellow citizens protecting and serving their local communities, the Ferguson factor will fade into the background. Then perhaps fewer officers and deputies will waste precious milliseconds second-guessing themselves before they act. Because as Sergeant John Slater knows, things happen fast.

Photo at top, showing Officer Ben Sauriol: The New American



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