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Peace Officers Murdered in California—1988

DURING 1988, law enforcement saw a dramatic increase in the number of peace officers murdered while performing their duties. Nine law enforcement officers in eight incidents lost their lives, all to firearms in 1988. The jurisdictions involved represented local police, county sheriff's deputies and federal agencies, and all suspects involved have been arrested and are in varying stages within the legal system.

This article will tabulate the information in table and chart form with accompanying narrative and tactical comments. The data presented in this article has been obtained from interviews with the homicide investigators responsible for each case. The information as presented in this article is intended to facilitate an increase in department and individual awareness in officer safety statewide.

Since 1980, California has averaged slightly over six officers murdered each year. The Los Angeles Police Department has suffered the most officer murders since that year with eight officers killed by suspects through 1988. The San Diego Police have lost seven officers to fe-

lonious homicides in the corresponding period. Inglewood Police lost their first officer in the history of the department this year when Sergeant George Aguilar was shot in the chest while in pursuit of robbery suspects.

Tabulated Information

In February of this year, two Drug Enforcement Agency special agents were murdered in a single incident. Because of this, the reader is cautioned to note that there are tables which are variously listed by event or by individual victim officers. This is done in order to arrive at a realistic sense of the events in order to more accurately model training aimed at preventing future officer murders.

Table I lists in column form twenty factors involved in the deaths of the nine officers this year. These factors are the date of the officer's murder, day of the week, time of day, law enforcement agency, rank, assignment, years of law enforcement experience, race, age, initial type of incident call, the number of additional officers on the scene at the time of the murder, the suspect's age and race, the type of murder weapon, fatal wound location and the distance

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Seventy-five per cent of the events occurred in the hours normally associated with darkness, 1800-0600

from the killer(s) to the victim(s). Additional information is indicated and footnoted if the victim was wearing ballistic armor (**), if the suspect was killed or committed suicide (***), and if the victim officer's service firearm was the murder weapon (****).

January, February and March saw five events with six of the nine murders of the year. In June, two officers were murdered in two events and the final officer murder of the year occurred in September. During 1988, 66% of the officer murders occurred in the first three months and 89% of the murders (all but one) occurred in the first half of the year. This finding corresponds with the statistics of 1986-87 wherein 80% of the officers murdered were killed in the first half of each year.

In January (Chart 1), two deputies (Los Angeles County and Sacramento County) and one officer (San Diego Police) lost their lives in three incidents. During February, two undercover federal Drug Enforcement Administration special agents were murdered by three suspects attempting a drug rip-off in the Los Angeles area. March saw a veteran officer in pursuit of robbery suspects in a stolen vehicle shot through the car door of his city owned vehicle in Inglewood.

In June, two separate incidents led to the deaths of another Los Angeles police officer and an East Palo Alto officer. Los Angeles had another officer murdered in September when he and his partner had taken cover behind their unit and were taken under fire by drive-by shooting suspects.

There is no significant skewing of events when related to days of the week (see Chart 2). Weekends (Fridays/Saturday/Sunday) were no more dangerous in terms of events than were the rest of the week. One homicide event of a police officer occurred each on Tuesday, Wednesday, Saturday and Sunday. Two officer murder events each day took place on Thursday and Friday.

Seventy five percent of the events occurred in the hours normally associated with darkness,

1800-0600 (Chart 3). The most dangerous periods consisting of four events, were between the hours of 2300 and 0100. Three peace officers were murdered in two events between the hours of 100 and 1200, while the remaining shooting occurred at 1900 and 2000 respectively.

All of the murders occurred in urban settings and all of the officers succumbed to firearm. All but one of the officers died of gunshot wounds to the head (the remaining officer died from a gunshot wound to the chest). Five of the officers were wearing ballistic vests at the time of their deaths (the sergeant from Sacramento County was additionally wearing a ballistic helmet when he was shot in the face), but this may be a misleading statistic. Of the remaining four victim officers, two were on an undercover assignment which precluded their wearing a vest and another was en-route to a scheduled training school out of the city when he happened upon a robbery in progress.

The victims were patrol officers in three cases, narcotics officers in four, one was assigned to a plain clothes robbery detail and the final officer was a sergeant on a Special Enforcement Detail (SWAT).

The murder victims' ages ranged between 24 and 52 years, with an average age of 33.8 years (See Chart 4). By five-year increments, the officers' ages were as follows: Two 21-25; two 26-30; two 31-35; one 36-40 and two 46 and older. The officers' race (Chart 5) was as follows: six Caucasian; two Hispanic and one Oriental.

When gaining a perspective on the experience of the murdered officers, the officers averaged 8.5 years in law enforcement (Chart 6). In five-year increments the factor of experience is as follows: two officers had less than one year on the department; three 6-10; three 11-15; one had 20 years.

The originating events to which these officers responded were: one in undercover narcotics; one serving a narcotics search warrant; two on suspicious vehicle/person calls; one each to a robbery in progress and a burglary and two to man-with-a-gun calls. In all but one of the events, back-up was available and on the scene. In the one exception, the suspects were immediately pursued by backup units and eventually captured (one suspect committed suicide).

All nine murders were cleared, with all but

one of the suspects male. By race (Chart 7), 58% of the suspects were black (7), 25% oriental (3) and 17% Caucasian (2). Six of the suspects were either killed on the scene or soon committed suicide. In three of the murders there were multiple suspects present. The suspects' ages ranged from 16 to 35, with an average of 22.9 years. Half of the perpetrators were under 21 years of age. By factoring out the eldest suspect, the average age then drops to 21.8 years of age for this group of cop killers. By increments of five years, the suspects' ages (Chart 8) were as follows: seven from 16-20; two 21-25; two 26-30; two 31-35.

The murder weapons in 1988 saw little variance. In only one case was an officer's weapon taken from him and used to kill him. All but one of the murders were committed with handguns. In the double murder of the DEA special agents, both a revolver and a semi-automatic were used. Revolvers were used by six suspects, semi-automatic handguns twice and an AR15 one (Chart 9). The breakdown of caliber by event is as follows Chart 10: .38 caliber was used most frequently (four times); .45 ACP twice; .22 LR, .44 magnum and 5.56 NATO once each.

The distance between victim officers and the suspect(s) (individually) when the fatal wound was received was an average of 10.3 feet. If the longest of these distances was to be factored out, the average distance was 5.3 feet from the gunman to the victim officer. Fifty five percent of the shooting occurred closer than five feet from the officers (Chart 11). By individual, the five foot increments are as follows: five from 0-5 feet; two from 6-10 feet; one from 16-20 feet and one at 50 feet (AR15).

Learning Points

The following analysis is made in an effort to draw conclusions which may be used in training to prevent future murders of California peace officers.

1. California law enforcement experienced a dramatic increase in the number of officers murdered during 1988 from the year before. Four peace officers were lost in 1987, whereas 1988 began with three officers killed in the first month. All of the calls to which the officers responded demanded caution. Each officer knew

that there was a high potential for violence. Narcotics enforcement, man-with-a-gun calls and suspicious person/vehicle calls continue to be police-killers. Sound officer safety tactics must be used in responding to these calls.

2. The first half of the year seems to see a significant rise in the officer murders in this state. In looking back over 1986-88, a large majority (85%) of the murders of peace officers occurred in the first half of the year. Although this is a very significant skewing of the events, officers are cautioned that there is no completely "safe" month of the year.

3. As to the days of the week, over a three year period, Thursdays are the most eventful day of the week, although every day of the week is represented.

4. Most of the events (75%) occurred during hours normally associated with hours of darkness. Much of night shooting training consists of moderately to brightly lit ranges with very little dependence on more realistic ambient light only in the training areas. Many rangemasters will cite the lack of safety in a darkened range environment, to the detriment of the troops who may well have to fire their weapons in defense of themselves and the public they protect.

This study shows that much of an officer's firearms training would be well spent on a night range, using some artificial lighting and ambient light.

5. Two of the murders resulted from partners splitting up in order to cover more area while searching, or in foot pursuit of suspects. Officers are cautioned that it is more important to stay with fellow officers and assist each other than to take unnecessary risks in attempting to apprehend fleeing suspects.

6. The two undercover agents murdered in Los Angeles were victims of a violent drug rip-off, and had few, if any defense options. There were as many as 15 officers and agents in the immediate area surveilling the "sale" when the agents were shot. Undercover work remains a dangerous assignment in which officers and agents are well served to remain attentive to any sign of assault from the suspects.

7. The difference in age between the murdered officers (34 years) and the suspects (22 years) is significant in that the suspects, being at least 12 years younger, are generally in better

Table 1—California Peace Officer Murders, 1988

| Date | Day | Time | Agency | Incident Type | Age/ Race | Years Exper | Rank | Assignmnt | Back up (scene) | Sus Age/ Race | Weapon | | | Fatal Wound |
|--------|-----|------|--------------------|-----------------------------|--------------|----------------|----------------|--------------------------|--------------------|----------------------------|-------------|------------|------------|----------------|
| | | | | | | | | | | | Type | Cal | Dist | |
| 8 Jan | Fri | 1900 | LASD** | Narcotics Warrant | 33/C | 12 | Dep | Narcotics Bureau | 5 Off | 20B*** | Rev | .38 | 6-10 | Head |
| 9 Jan | Sat | 0020 | SDPD** | Suspicious Person | 24/C | 1 | Off | Patrol | 1 Off | 24/E | Rev | .22 | 0-3 | Head |
| 21 Jan | Thu | 2300 | Sac SD** | Susp Vehicle Susp Search | 36/C | 11 | Sgt | SWAT | 30+ Dep | 28/C*** | Autc | .45 | 20 | Head |
| 5 Feb | Fri | 1220 | DEA | Undercover Narco Sale | 34/H 52/A | 9 12 | Sp Ag Sp Ag | Narcotics Enforcement | 15+ Off | 26/A*** 18/A*** 18/A | Autc Rev | .45 .38 | 0-3 0-3 | Head Head |
| 31 Mar | Thu | 1035 | Inglewood PD | Off Initiated Wit to 211 | 46/H | 20 | Sgt | Narcotics Supervisor | 0 | 31/E*** 18/E | Rev | .44 | 6-10 | Chest |
| 7 Jun | Tue | 0100 | LAPD** | Burglary Alarm | 24/C | 1 | Off | Patrol | 1 | 16/C*** | Rev**** | .38 | 0-3 | Head |
| 22 Jun | Wed | 0056 | E. Palo Alto PD | Man with a Gun | 26/C | 6 | Off | Patrol | 1 | 35/B | Rev | .38 | 0-3 | Head |
| 3 Sep | Sat | 2025 | LAPD** | Man with a Gun | 30/C | 6 | Off | Robbery | 1 | 21/B 16/E | AR15 | .223 | 50 | Head |

Notes: Race: C=Caucasian, B=Black, H=Hispanic, A=Asian

Victim officer was wearing ballistic armor at the time of his death *Suspect either killed at scene or committed suicide ****Officer murdered with his own weapon

physical condition. That six of the suspects were under the age of 21 should also alert officers to the fact that young criminals are willing to challenge officers. In looking at officer murders since 1980, at no time have the killers of peace officers been so young (as a group) as is the case in 1988. In only one case was the suspect older than the victim officer.

Physical fitness and faster, reaction type shooting techniques, such as the military's "Quick-kill" program, should be stressed with all officers.

8. The average years of law enforcement experience the officers had was over eight and one half years. All levels of duty experience were represented in the study, from the greenest of rookies (one officer was on an academy ride-along with another was just three months out of the academy) to a twenty-year veteran officer who had extensive patrol and SWAT experience. The bulk of the victims had between six and 12 years of experience (66%). This period in an officer's experience seems to be a time when a certain level of burnout and sense of routine seem to set in.

Continued training and attempts by supervisory staff to identify those individuals which may fit into the "I've seen it all and it's always the same" syndrome and seek corrective measures is necessary.

9. All but one of the fatal injuries suffered by the victim officers were head wounds caused by gunshot. This would seem to indicate that the near universal requirement that officers wear ballistic vests during duty hours is increasing officers' ability to survive a firefight.

Tactical officers should note that one sergeant from a sheriff's tactical unit in Sacramento County was killed while wearing not only entry armor but also an Israeli-made-ballistic helmet. This is the second tactical officer murdered in California in two years (actually the murders were only week apart: December 5, 1987 and January 21, 1988). Care must still be taken while on a mission even though an officer is afforded maximum protection in the form of body armor.

Another, more disturbing trend may be that because the wearing of ballistic vests is receiving greater publicity in the press, suspects may now be concentrating on head shots when deal-

ing with the police. Care should be exercised when doing press releases which constantly emphasize that officers "were saved only by their bullet proof vest!"

10. In 1987 and again in 1988 the trend toward suspects being able to snatch the sidearm away from an officer or deputy is declining. Only in one case in the last two years was an officer murdered by his own weapon (a total of 7% of the cases). This is down from a consistent year to year (prior to 1987) total of 15% of officers who were murdered with their own weapons. This may be a reflection of more consistent department weapon retention training and a corresponding sensitivity of officers to this potential danger.

11. In all but one of the cases there was backup either immediately at the scene (in one case there were over 30 officers present) or in the immediate area. This is another disturbing statistic which comes from this study. The question which continues to arise is, "Do the murdered officers allow their guard down or become tactically sloppy because they feel over-confident when there are other officers around?" It is a question which begs an answer. Officers should be cautioned that until a crime scene or situation is declared to be Code Four, their sensitivity to the principles and tactics of officer safety should be strictly adhered to.

12. The distance from which most of the officers (55%) received the killing wound was less than five feet. Two officers were killed at contact or point blank distances. It is imperative that firearms training be conducted in which peace officers may learn how to quickly and effectively shoot and move at very close targets.

The one event in which an officer died at 50 feet was a situation in which the victim officer and his partner had followed a suspect vehicle (a drive-by shooting had just occurred from that vehicle) to a dead end street and the officers had parked in a lot adjacent to the street. A suspect opened fire with an AR15 and the officers returned fire. Although he used good technique, the officer was struck in the head by a round, killing him.

This emphasizes that even though the statistics say that most suspects will be very close and very violent, distance shooting and moving targets as well as very close range shooting are in-

valuable as training aids.

The first half of 1988 was a very discouraging time. California peace officers were losing one officer on a weekly, then monthly basis. Many of the officers were killed just doing their assignments as was the case of the DEA agents, or after stumbling onto a crime in progress, reacting to the situation as was the case of the Inglewood sergeant.

The learning points stay the same: initial positions of advantage, silent deployment, do not split partners, cover and concealment, and use of all available resources. Officers should be encouraged to avoid thinking "routine" and be made aware of the rational dangers of their profession. Back-up officers should be used wisely as a tactical resource. And as always, training should reflect the realities of the profession's requirements.

Chart 1—Officer Murder Event by Month

| Jan | Feb | Mar | Apr | May | Jun | Jul | Aug | Sep | Oct | Nov | Dec |
|-----|-----|-----|-----|-----|-----|-----|-----|-----|-----|-----|-----|
| 3 | 1* | 1 | | | 2 | | | 1 | | | |

*Two officers were murdered in one event

Chart 2—Officer Murder Event by Day of the Week

| Sun | Mon | Tue | Wed | Thu | Fri | Sat |
|-----|-----|-----|-----|-----|-----|-----|
| 1 | | 1 | 1 | 2 | 2* | 1 |

*Two officers murdered in one day for a total of three officers killed on Friday in 1988

Chart 3—Officer Murder Events by Time of Day

| Day | | | | | | | | | | | |
|-------|------|------|------|------|------|------|------|------|------|------|------|
| 0600 | 0700 | 0800 | 0900 | 1000 | 1100 | 1200 | 1300 | 1400 | 1500 | 1600 | 1700 |
| | | | | 1 | | 1* | | | | | |
| Night | | | | | | | | | | | |
| 1800 | 1900 | 2000 | 2100 | 2200 | 2300 | 2400 | 0100 | 0200 | 0300 | 0400 | 0500 |
| | 1 | 1 | | | 1 | 2 | 1 | | | | |

*Two agents died in this single event

Chart 4—Victim Officer's Age

| 21-25 | 26-30 | 31-35 | 36-40 | 41-45 | 46+ |
|-------|-------|-------|-------|-------|-----|
| 2 | 2 | 2 | 1 | | 2 |

Chart 5—Victim Officer's Race

| Caucasian | Black | Hispanic | Oriental |
|-----------|-------|----------|----------|
| 6 | | 2 | 1 |

Chart 6—Victim Officer's Law Enforcement Experience

| 0-5 | 6-10 | 11-15 | 16-20 | 21+ |
|-----|------|-------|-------|-----|
| 2 | 3 | 3 | 1 | |

Murder Suspect's Race

| Caucasian | Black | Hispanic | Oriental |
|-----------|-------|----------|----------|
| 2 | 7 | | 3 |

Chart 8—Age of Murder Suspects

| 15-20 | 21-25 | 26-30 | 31-35 |
|-------|-------|-------|-------|
| 6 | 2 | 2 | 2 |

Chart 9—Type of Weapon**Handgun**

| Revolver | Semi-Auto | Rifle |
|----------|-----------|-------|
| 6* | 2 | 1 |

*One officer was murdered with his own weapon

Chart 10—Caliber of Murder Weapon

| .22 | .38 | .44 | .45 | .223 |
|-----|-----|-----|-----|------|
| 1 | 4* | 1 | 2 | 1 |

*Officer's own weapon

Chart 11—Distance Between Suspect and Officer

| 0-5 | 6-10 | 11-15 | 16-20 | 21+ |
|-----|------|-------|-------|-----|
| 5 | 2 | | 1 | 1* |

*Shot at 50 feet