

SPECIAL REPORT: POLICE SHOOTINGS

DPD arsenal offers less-lethal weapons

City among leaders of trend with recent addition of Tasers, beanbag shotguns

By Brian D. Crocente
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Jeremiah Kennedy wasn't going to be taken alive.

Claiming he had a gun, the 22-year-old drug fugitive stood on the front steps of an abandoned building on Oct. 15 with his hand jammed in his waistband and dared police to shoot him.

So they did — and probably saved his life.

Two Denver SWAT officers peppered Kennedy with pellet-filled bags fired from a shotgun.

The first three bags slammed into Kennedy's thighs. He staggered. A fourth bag knocked him off his feet. That's when officers arrested him.

"There were no marks on his legs after the incident," said SWAT Capt. Tim Cuthriell. "He had a pretty good red welt about the size of a silver dollar on his side — but it could have been a bullet hole."

Kennedy's timing was good. His confrontation with police last month came two weeks after Denver police started a "less-lethal" weapons program that experts say will make the department one of the most progressive in the country.

Less-lethal weapons are designed to stop a person without killing him. However, the department will train officers to use these weapons only in situations where shooting a suspect with a gun would be justified.

"We would not train our officers to use less-lethal when confronted with a suspect armed with a handgun," Capt. Marco Vasquez said.

"We are not going to use this on real felons, violent felons. We are going to use it on people who are in crisis."

It's a program that many believe will save lives.

A *Rocky Mountain News* analysis of the 85 police shootings from 1990 to 2000 found that about one of every four cases might have fit under the guidelines for using less-lethal weapons.

By the end of next year, every neighborhood patrol officer and supervisor will be trained and armed with two less-lethal weapons:

■ The M26 Taser, which fires electric probes up to 21 feet. A 26-watt charge from the probe causes a suspect's arm and leg muscles to contract and lock up for five seconds.

■ The beanbag shotgun, which fires a two-inch-square beanbag into a person with enough force to cause loss of breath.

The department bought about 100 of each weapon with the help of a \$100,000 federal block grant, Vasquez said.

The department also bought 10 semi-automatic PepperBall guns for the SWAT unit to test.

The rifles fire a plastic paint-ball-like ammo filled with a concentrated derivative of red cayenne pepper. The plastic balls burst on impact, unleashing the pepper powder in a cloud that wafts into a person's eyes, nose and lungs. That can cause temporary blindness and difficulty breathing.

The air-powered guns can fire six rounds per second up to 100 feet.

Denver did a good job of choosing its less-lethal weapons, said Michael Brave, president of LAAW International, which provides law enforcement risk-management services.

"There is a trend nationwide of departments moving toward less-lethal, but Denver seems to be a leader."

"We are not going to use this on real felons. We are going to use it on people who are in crisis."

— Marco Vasquez, Denver Police captain.

SAFER STOPPING POWER

By the end of next year, the Denver Police Department will arm all patrol officers and supervisors with Tasers and beanbag ammunition. The SWAT unit will test semiautomatic PepperBall guns.

M26 Taser

The Taser shoots two probes up to 21 feet, causing a person's skeletal muscles to contract and lock up.

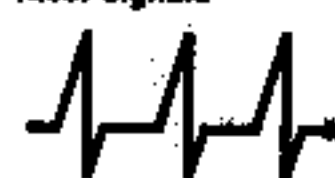
HOW IT WORKS:

Normal brain signals



Communication between the brain and the body is conducted via electrical signals.

Taser signals



The Taser's signal is similar to the body's signals.

Taser and brain signals



These signals jam the communication between the brain and the body, incapacitating the person shot.

DATA PORT:

Built-in memory automatically records the date and time of each discharge.

AIR CARTRIDGE: Compressed nitrogen propel two probes. Wires attached to probes conduct 50,000 volts to the target.

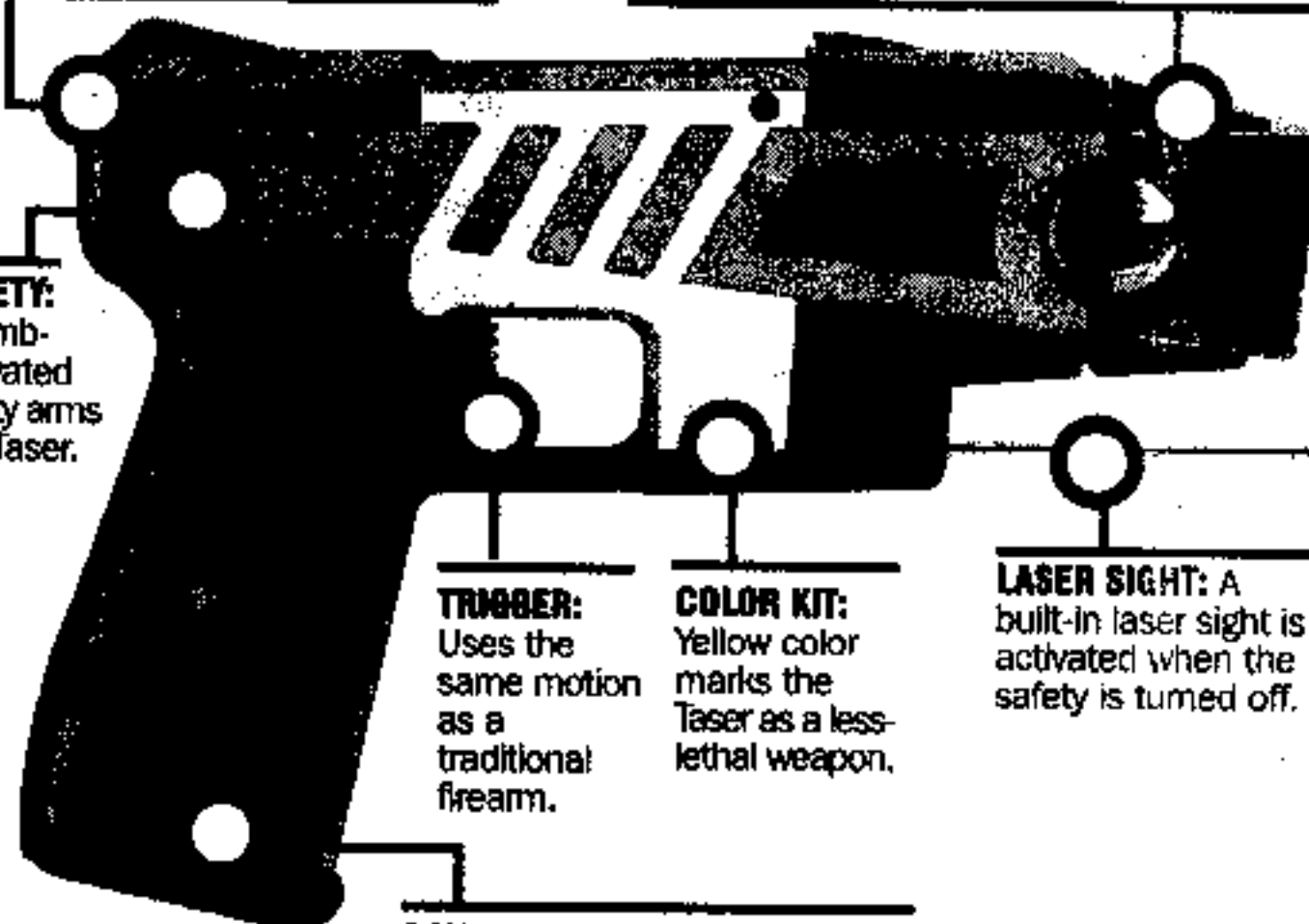
SAFETY: Thumb-activated safety arms the Taser.

TRIGGER: Uses the same motion as a traditional firearm.

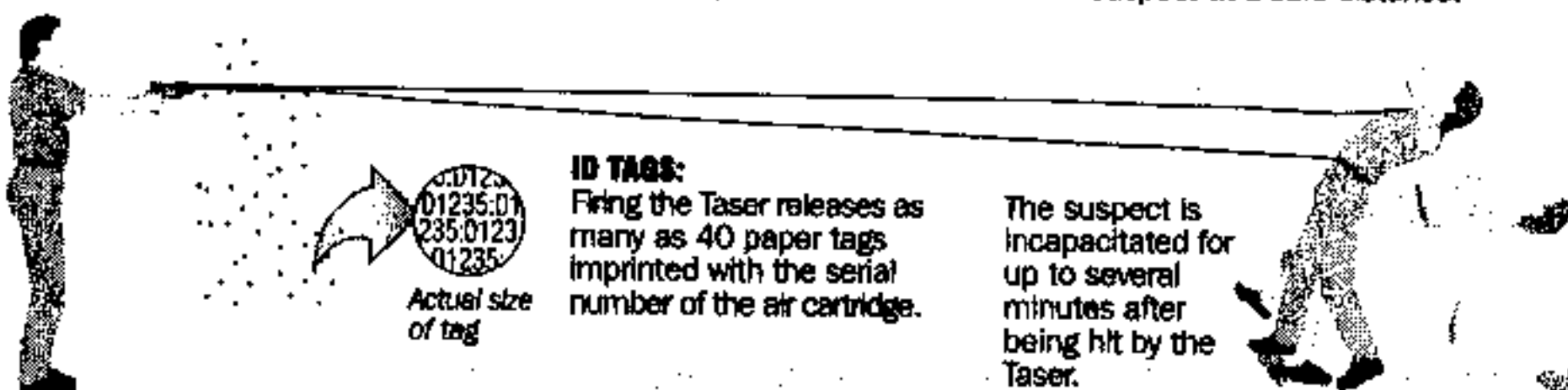
COLOR KIT: Yellow color marks the Taser as a less-lethal weapon.

LASER SIGHT: A built-in laser sight is activated when the safety is turned off.

POWER SOURCE: The Taser runs on 8 standard AA batteries.



The Taser has a range of up to 21 feet. With it, a police officer can subdue a suspect at a safe distance.



ID TAGS: Firing the Taser releases as many as 40 paper tags imprinted with the serial number of the air cartridge.

The suspect is incapacitated for up to several minutes after being hit by the Taser.

Beanbag ammunition

HOW IT WORKS: Fired from a bright orange shotgun, the beanbag ammunition is a 2-inch square filled with lead shot that delivers a blunt impact that can knock down or knock the wind out of a suspect, allowing police to gain control.

RANGE: Between 20 and 30 feet.



PepperBall projectiles

HOW IT WORKS: Similar to paint balls, PepperBall projectiles release a burst of pepper spray on impact, causing tearing of the eyes and loss of breath for the person shot.

RANGE: From point-blank up to 100 feet.



PepperBall rifle
 (PepperBalls can also be fired from a handgun-style launcher.)

Source: Jaycor Tactical Systems; Taser International; Denver Police Department; A.L.S. Technologies

Andres Fernandez/Rocky Mountain News