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In Memory...

ADVANCED

TASER TRAINING CLASS

By Tony Lesce

Having experienced several controversial shootings in recent years (most of which resulted in lawsuits), the Albuquerque PD, (New Mexico) put several new techniques in place. Things like Crisis Intervention Teams and beanbag shotgun rounds.

Albuquerque also decided to equip its patrol officers with the M26 Advanced Taser, a less-lethal weapon, and set up a program at the Albuquerque Police Academy to present the four-hour training course to all officers. Sergeant Cornel Heitzman, a 19-year veteran of the APD, stated that the Taser M26 has already reduced the number of shootings by incapacitating suspects without permanent injury:

"We've used the Advanced Taser at least 20 times, and three of them were 'suicide by cop' situations. We've avoided many lawsuits by using Tasers, as 99 percent of shootings result in a lawsuit."

Officer Thomas Munsey, a nine-year veteran, conducted one class for about 35 officers. Munsey is a Taser-certified Master Instructor, authorized to "train the trainers," and is certified by the New Mexico Department of Public Safety. He began with having officers experience the Taser, to familiarize themselves with its effects. He and his assistants taped the darts to officers' clothing and administered the high-frequency current. All who volunteered found themselves immediately incapacitated by the Taser. According to Munsey, this experience would be useful in court if an attorney asked the

officers if they were familiar with the effects of the Taser.

Munsey stated that over 800 North American agencies use the M26, and he showed some videotapes of officers using the device to subdue combative suspects. One tape, taken in Toronto by City TV, showed Toronto Emergency Task Force taking down an armed suspect with the Taser. Another showed a similar incident involving the Phoenix (Arizona) Police Department. Another agency that uses the M26 is the US Marine Embassy Guards. There have also been instances of use by correctional officers carrying out cell extractions. One inmate, high on crystal

meth, resisted all efforts until the Chandler (Arizona) extraction team used the Taser on him – this quelled resistance immediately.

The M26

Munsey demonstrated the Taser to the class, pointing out that it comes with color-coded labels to identify it as a less-lethal weapon, because its black polymer construction resembles an auto pistol. The M26 uses either eight rechargeable Nickel Metal Hydride (NiMH) batteries or eight "AA" Duracell Ultra batteries, and the removable battery carrier is in the grip. The on-off switch is located at the top rear, and resembles the ambidextrous safety used on Beretta auto pistols. A flashing red light confirms that the unit is on and that the batteries have enough power. Alkaline batteries are enough for about 25 discharges, and

rechargeable NiMH batteries last for over 100 discharges.

The M26 has molded pistol-type sights and a built-in laser sight that projects a red dot onto the target. A cartridge fits into the front of the Taser and compressed nitrogen propels two darts connected to the unit by wires. Because the Taser uses nitrogen, and not gunpowder, ATF does not classify it as a firearm, and it is not subject to the same restrictions as firearms. Only Washington, DC, Hawaii, Massachusetts, Michigan, New Jersey, (Continued on page 30)





...compared to the .38 Special revolver, the Taser has no long-term injuries. "Only 50 percent of those shot with a .38 Special survived, and of those, 100 percent had permanent injuries."

New York, Rhode Island, and Wisconsin, ban the carry of the Taser off-duty.

Muzzle velocity is 180 fps, and the unit develops 26 watts at 50,000 volts. Power is 162 milliamperes, 1/100 of the danger level. Unlike the stun gun, which depends upon pain compliance, the Taser uses Electro Mechanical Disruption (EMD) to jam the nervous system and stop voluntary movement. Munsey stated that animal tests had shown no effect on heart rhythm and no damage to pacemakers. There are also no long-term effects, unlike some aerosols. However, he warned against using the Taser on pregnant women, because the strong muscular contractions could present adverse complications in late-term pregnancies, such as falling to the ground.

The darts have 1/4' barbs made from small #8 straightened fish hooks, which

implant themselves in the suspect's clothing and sometimes in the skin. The 50,000 volts can jump the gap to the suspect's skin if heavy clothing is in the way, and the Taser's current can penetrate up to 2 1/4" of clothing. The result is to reduce officer and suspect injuries by stopping threats from a safe distance.

Munsey brought out statistics to show the safety of the Taser. To date, there have been only two deaths indirectly resulting from the Tasertron's use, one because of a fall, and another when the suspect drowned in a swimming pool. He warned against using the Taser when flammable substances are present – one gasoline-soaked suspect in California was set afire, though not fatally.

One study cited by Taser International showed that, compared to the .38 Special revolver, the Taser has no long-term injuries. "Only 50 percent of those shot with a .38 Special survived, and of those, 100 percent had permanent injuries."

The M26 used by the Albuquerque Police Department uses cartridges with 21 foot wires, although less expensive 15-foot models are available for training. The lower dart travels out at a downward angle of eight degrees to provide one foot

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of separation for every seven feet traveled. Greater separation is desirable for enhanced effect. The M26 also has electrodes in front to allow touch-stun use after firing, or if the M26 is unloaded.

Pressing the trigger fires the darts and provides a timed, five-second discharge. Munsey stated that it's best to give the suspect the full five seconds without interruption for maximum effect. Earlier models did not have five-second timers, and there were failures because the officers released the triggers too early. A shorter time may not be effective. However, if the officer wants to stop after a couple of seconds, he need only press down the safety to stop the current.

Use of Force

Munsey explained the M26's place in the use-of-force continuum, as the Albuquerque Police Department's policy places it at the level of the baton. Many other agencies rate it at the level of chemical agents. Unlike chemical agents, the Taser is useful in closed environments, and will not affect others in the room.

Field tests of the 7-Watt Taser by the Los Angeles Police Department have shown that fewer officer and suspect injuries are associated with it than with other less-lethal techniques. Using a flashlight as an impact weapon has resulted in almost 80 percent injuries to the suspect, similar in occurrence to punching the suspect or using a baton. Chemical sprays have produced five percent injuries to suspects, and 29 percent of the time the officer was also affected because of the spray's dispersal. Other uses of force studied were miscellaneous body force, "swarming," and kicking, and all had much higher rates of injuries than did the Taser.

One effect of the Taser, as Munsey demonstrated on volunteer officers is that it incapacitates immediately, and Munsey pointed out that gunshots do not necessarily stop a suspect at once. Another is that the target area is much larger. Aerosols work only if the spray is in the face, and gunfire is effective mainly if the points of impact are in the head, neck, and central torso. The Taser works as long as the darts hit anywhere on the body, because the current travels between the darts.

Warnings

What Can Go Wrong

Nothing is 100 percent perfect, and experience has shown that the Taser can

malfunction. One possible problem explained by Munsey is low batteries, which won't allow the unit to develop full power. A NiMH battery recharger will be available in late November. It will recharge by plugging the recharger in the M26 data port, located at the rear of the M26.

Another problem is thick clothing. If the darts are more than 2 1/4" inches from the skin, the current won't jump the gap. Yet another is when one dart misses, because it's necessary to have two points of contact to complete the circuit. Munsey stressed the importance of holding the Taser M26 upright, without tilting, because this is a common cause of missing. A secondary cartridge is available that allows immediate access to a rapid second shot if the probes miss.

Officer Munsey laid out some warnings and precautions when using the M26:

"Do not use it for coercion. Use it only to stop a threat. Don't 'taser' a guy at the top of a flight of stairs or a freeway overpass. The suspect could be injured by the fall."

After-Effects

The suspect can be dazed for several minutes after use of the Taser. Solid hits against a suspect wearing light clothing result in the barbed darts being embedded in the skin. This requires treatment by emergency room personnel, according to Munsey:

"Our treatment is to have emergency room personnel remove the darts, using gloves. The darts are biohazards because of the possibility of blood-borne pathogens. Always carry a sample dart to show the doctor what it is. You can tape a dart to your business card, for example."

Sgt. Heitzman explained the way to remove the dart:

"Place two fingers on either side of the dart and pull it out quickly. You have to hold the surrounding skin in place to prevent drag effect and minimize injury."

Follow-up

All use of the M26 requires a report, and the Albuquerque Police Department's field investigators will come to the scene to document the site. Each cartridge is serially numbered, and signed out to a particular officer.

Taser cartridges carry Anti Felon Identification (AFID) tags with the cartridge's serial number stamped on them and these are released with the firing of the darts. A chip in the M26 records each firing of the Taser, along with the time and date. This information can be downloaded by plugging a computer cable into

the M26's data port, located at the rear of the device. This helps document the M26's use, and helps protect against excessive force claims.

Case Law

There have been several lawsuits involving the Taser, and Munsey discussed them briefly. **Mateyko v. Felix** (1997 CA), awarded \$19,680 for inadequate training. **Alford et al v. OSEI-KWASI et al** (1992 GA) resulted from a corrections officer using the Taser on a pregnant woman (Alford) and the appellate court granted summary judgment to the correctional officer defendants. **Michenfelder v. Sumner et al** (1988 NV) resulted from the Taser being used to enforce a strip search. The officer pointed the Taser at Michenfelder, but did not fire it, and the plaintiff (Michenfelder) lost. In **Hinton v. City of Elwood** (1993 KS) the appeals court found that using the Taser to subdue the suspect, who was kicking and biting, was reasonable use of force.

New Less-Lethal Weapon

The Albuquerque Police Department is equipping all patrol officers with the new Advanced Taser M26 to reduce injuries to both suspects and officers. Taser-equipped officers are being trained before they are allowed to carry the device. To date, use of the Taser has avoided several shootings and lawsuits.

For more information contact:
Taser International
7860 E. McClain Drive, Suite 2
Scottsdale, AZ 85260-1627
Phone: (480) 991-0797
Fax: (480) 991-0791
Web site: www.TASER.com

Albuquerque Police Department
5408 Second Street NW
Albuquerque, NM 87107
Phone: (505) 761-8800
Fax: (505) 761-8896
Att: Sgt. Cornel Heitzman ☆

About the Author

Tony Lesce is a free-lance law enforcement journalist who has been working for The Police Marksman for two decades. Based in New Mexico, Tony provides articles on police-related products and other law enforcement topics.