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Captain Dave Starcher prepares to fire an M26 at a practice target in the classroom at APPS.

TASER INTERNATIONAL'S M26

THE NEXT GENERATION OF MODERATE LEVEL FORCE

BY ROB PINGUS

In the course of a generation lots of things change.

It would not surprise me if the next generation of cops are carrying the M26 Advanced Taser or devices similar to it in place of common less-lethal options we now consider necessary for effective law enforcement. When my father was in uniform, he and many of his partners carried saps, but when I went through the academy these tools were anathema in our community. It would not surprise me if the M26 put OC spray in that category.

A few weeks ago I attended an M26 Instructor's Course at the Academy of Personal Protection and Security (APPS) in Nashville, Tennessee. Several police departments and correctional facilities had sent representatives to get up to speed on this new device that is just beginning to work its way into the region. I became familiar with the device while interacting with officers in Florida who already have extensive experience and success with the M26. Since late in 2000, I have heard nothing but good reports from the officers I know who have personally deployed or been present when the M26 has successfully ended a dangerous encounter with a non-compliant or combative subject. I had been looking forward to the opportunity to find out for myself just how effective the device was—and what the science was behind it.

For those of you not familiar with the device, it consists of a polymer frame that looks very much like a toy gun, complete with yellow stripes. The grip of the device houses the battery pack (eight size AA) and there is an option for a built-in laser in the front of the



The M26 Advanced Taser with optional spare cartridge carrier attached to grip.

device. The "trigger" actually feels more like a rubber coated button, but the device was designed to feel and operate like a firearm—to take advantage of established muscle memory and be intuitive for an officer to operate.

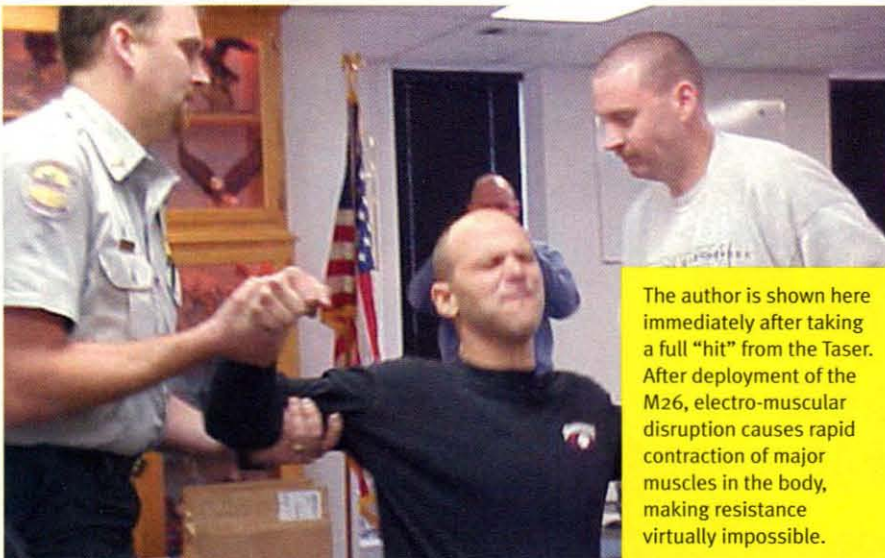
When the device is deployed (not "fired," more on that in a minute) two metal probes with #8 stainless steel barbs are blasted out of the front trailing thin wires behind. When the probes reach their target, the energy flowing through the wires seeks the path of least

resistance between the probes. The 50,000 volts of electricity flow at twenty-six watts, fifteen to twenty times per second, for five seconds.

Unlike older "stun guns", which operated at much lower wattages, the M26 is not a pain compliance device. Much research was done to determine that a device over sixteen watts begins to cause Electro-Muscular Disruption (EMD) by interfering with the electrical signals that the brain sends out through the nerves to control muscles. Simply put, the target can be so drunk, high or enraged that his brain is not registering any pain at all—and the M26 can still take him out of the fight by simply overriding his muscular control.

The non-law enforcement version of the device works exactly the same way, but is rated at eighteen watts. The standard cycle is five seconds and the recommended procedure is to never override that cycle when deploying the device in the field.

Taser recommends using the term "deploy" instead of "fire" to clearly distinguish the device from a firearm, particularly in the heat of the moment when officers might be directing one another to use a Taser on a subject or warning that they are about to use the device. We all know that sympathetic fire has been known to happen, and Taser trains users to take every step possible to make sure that the subject, other officers and any



The author is shown here immediately after taking a full "hit" from the Taser. After deployment of the M26, electro-muscular disruption causes rapid contraction of major muscles in the body, making resistance virtually impossible.

by-standers know what is going on when they hear the discharge of the probes and see the reaction of the target.

While APPS hosted the course, Mike Capagna of the Charlotte-Mecklenburg Police Department in North Carolina was the instructor. Mike's department has successfully deployed the M26 many times since they adopted it and he is a strong believer in its effectiveness. When Mike asked for volunteers to take a "full hit" I waited a few seconds for anyone else to take the opportunity before I raised my hand. Although I know other officers who had received a hit from the device, I didn't personally know of anyone who had actually been shot. It is important to note that the operator's course does not require the officer to experience being "tased." Similarly, the instructor's course does not actually require that you be shot with the device for a full hit.

The standard procedure for potential instructors is for the probes to have their barbs snipped off and be tapped to the subjects clothing. After the probes have been attached, the instructor triggers the device and overrides the normal five second cycle once the student has gotten the feel of the M26. Volunteers are always welcome to take the test further and I've never been one to pass up a good training experience. It is my opinion that if you are going to teach a four-hour course on how "instantly incapacitating" and yet "completely safe" a device is, you should be prepared to demonstrate both aspects. If you are going to be an M26 instructor, you must believe in the device and research, so why wouldn't you take a shot? Wanting to avoid pain is the obvious answer.

I have never felt pain like I did the instant after I heard the "POP!" from several feet behind me. Operators are told to aim for large muscle groups and areas where close fit relatively tight clothing is worn, therefore the

upper legs and back are the best and safest target areas. While there is no increased danger due to the electricity, the probes hitting the eyes, throat or genitals could obviously cause injury, so training shots are either done from behind or with appropriate protective gear.

At first, I arched upward and said something like a combination of "Ow!" and "Oh!" after that, it was a "\$*!& \$*!&!" for about 4.9 seconds. Although I had two people more or less supporting my arms and I was trying for at least the first three seconds, I could not remain on my feet or stand up, the muscle contractions were too much to try to overcome. The pain was significant and I can only imagine that it felt like having two screwdrivers attached to jackhammers being driven into my back. Yes, it's that bad.

On the video it is clear to see that within a couple of seconds of the cycle I was getting to my feet and laughing nervously (albeit with two metal probes sticking out of my back). The closest things to lasting effect I noticed were a very stiff back for the next day or so and the two small wounds from the probes. I have experienced blunt trauma, chemical agents, older "stun guns," pressure point and joint lock techniques—all of which were at least less incapacitating or brought more long-lasting damage than a full hit from the M26. There is a great abundance of empirical evidence that a person can be shot with a firearm and not be instantly incapacitated. There are few instances of that happening with the M26.

With the practical test over, it was time to get back into the science and application of the M26. With a power of less than 2 joules, the M26 represents less than 2% of the power in a defibrillator—the device will not stop a person's heart.

Taser recommends using NiMH (Nickel-Metal-Hydrate) rechargeable batteries for

maximum efficiency. If you are not able to use this type of battery, only top quality (Duracell Ultra, Energizer Titanium) batteries are recommended. This cannot be stressed enough. Use quality batteries and check them often!

The M26 cartridges have a twenty-one foot range and the probes spread approximately one foot every seven feet traveled. Optimal deployment range is twelve to eighteen feet. The Taser can also be used as a contact device, with or without a probe cartridge attached.

The eighteen watt Advanced Taser (M18) is available for civilian self-defense. It is important to note that unlike older devices, the Advanced Taser's probes are discharged by compressed nitrogen, not an explosive charge, so they are not considered firearms.

To deter and identify criminal use, the cartridges drop dozens of confetti like disks when they discharge. These disks are imprinted with a serial number that Taser can trace to the purchaser of the cartridge. Also, the device has a built in memory that records the exact time and duration of the most recent 585 deployments—for use by supervisors and administration in Use of Force investigations.

Unlike chemical sprays, which inevitably affect the deploying officer and his partners, the Taser is a targeted weapon. Unlike firearms, which are obviously lethal and only instantly incapacitating in a limited target area, the Taser will incapacitate with any circuit-completing hit with no lasting effects. While Taser recommends issuing the M26 to all patrol officers so that it can have a greater likelihood of being present when it can be helpful in avoiding suspect or officer injury, some departments have chosen to issue them to supervisors or to tactical units first. I highly recommend looking into this device for your department.

APPS regularly holds courses to train and certify private citizens, police officers and security agents with chemical sprays, impact devices, firearms and, of course, the M26 and M18 Advanced Tasers. ☺

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