

# Overcoming Fear in Crisis Situations

David Henderson

## ***Abstract***

*This paper will look at “fear” and how we can use it to our advantage. There are circumstances when officers are hesitating to react in crisis situations because they are allowing the emotion of fear to block their decision making process. We will look at the different ways people may respond to fear. A survey was conducted throughout the state of Florida with results that show other Training Officers are experiencing the same concerns. In conclusion, we will look at suggested training methods to help officers recognize their fears and work through them to a successful outcome.*

## **Introduction**

It is inevitable through our life we will be confronted with some type of fear. There are many types of fear that can come upon us in various stages and these stages can have a gradual onset or may be sudden and immediate. For example, you could be planning a first time white water rafting trip, conduct a presentation to an audience, or organize a conference for your agency. These would most likely have a gradual increase of fear and anxiety as the event gets closer. Immediate fear on the other hand could be caused by a sudden catastrophic event, car crash, or being awakened by an unfamiliar sound in the middle of the night.

This fear and anxiety holds true in law enforcement and criminal justice arenas as well. Officers are getting injured and killed, or causing their partners to be injured or killed by hesitating to take action in a dangerous situation. The fear can be generated by a number of different reasons. Some of those reasons can be the fear of physical harm or death, not knowing the appropriate action to take, or wondering if your agency will back you.

This paper will look at ways to help overcome these fears and use it to drive through the situation toward a positive result. This is not a guarantee that all results will be good ones. But if we learn how to channel these fears through mental focus and reality based training, we can overcome the hesitation or pause in combat and deal with the threat as quickly as possible.

## **Literature Review**

For some police officers, fear is the number one reason for hesitating in a crisis situation. It's not always fear of their own lives that cause the hesitation. A lot of officers who hesitate to use lethal force are consumed with thoughts of being sued, losing their job, not knowing what level of force to use, etc.

Fear is a normal emotion and can be used to either motivate us or undermine our decision to take action. This can be described in two categories: natural fear and conditioned fear. Natural fear often is the belief of one's own death or causing the death of another. An example of this is when cops are apprehensive about using their firearm

upon another human being. Conditioned fear is fear that has been taught to us. It is extended by secondary factors outside an officer's control, but can still effect his/her actions. An example of this type of fear is officers who "fear" they may lose their job. It is out of our control if we get sued or lose our job because we defended our life. Also, we cannot stop complaints or being investigated after a shooting. The reason these fears are having such an effect on our careers is because many administrations have created a conditioned hesitation and fear before officer's use any force option.

A person will respond in one of five ways when faced with a violent attacker: fight, flight, freeze, posture, or submit. Fear alone can cause performance failure leading you to freeze. You must train and maintain tactical proficiency while staying current with the latest techniques and technology. Psychologically prepare yourself for using deadly force on a daily bases (VanBlaricum, 2005).

In order to control fear you first have to admit that you are afraid. Admitting that you are afraid does not mean you are unable to handle the danger. It's just you being able to acknowledge what you are feeling. By knowing you are afraid may actually allow you to process and think through the danger more carefully. Do not dwell on the danger or think that you will fail. If you are always in fear of facing the danger, your mind cannot focus on winning.

Your mind and body need to act as a team so first you must calm your body by doing deep slow rhythmic breaths, inhaling through your nose, holding it for three or four seconds and exhaling steadily through your mouth. This will slow your heart and pulse rate, lower your blood pressure, and help clear your mind so you can think better. Now focus on getting through the dangerous situation safely. Look at your surroundings, call for back-up, think out your tactics, anticipate danger, etc.

A warrior expects the unexpected and is able to turn fear into a motivator. He or she tells themselves they have the ability and the skills to handle fear in a dangerous situation. Harness your fear and anger in a deadly situation and use it as a motivator to succeed (Grossi, 2010).

In the police officer profession, it is inevitable that anxiety is a part of the job. At any given time, there will be situations that will pressure you to perform at your peak and making the right decision is crucial. There are large amounts of research that show we are more likely to notice a threat when we are anxious and less likely to identify nonthreatening stimuli. This puts oversized attention on a possible threat. This can cause officers to shoot faster when anxious and may focus on threats that are not relevant to the current crisis.

Officers were put in low and high anxiety level scenarios and had to make rapid decisions in whether or not to shoot a suspect. The scenarios had armed suspects and unarmed suspects. During higher levels of anxiety, the officers were more likely to shoot, which could also mean shooting an unarmed suspect or one that is surrendering. It was also noticed the higher level of anxiety there was, the officer shot faster and shots were less accurate.

They found that incorrect responses nearly doubled when officers were put under pressure. You are more likely to anticipate a threat when you are anxious but through continued training, you may be able to lessen your anxiety level (Matta, 2012)

When you are under sudden stress and fear you will most likely experience your pupils dilating, adrenalin surging, heart thumping, ability to distinguish time and

distance, and you revert to the things you learned in training without thinking. If you have only done the basic fundamentals in training and have not trained realistically, this could get you killed.

For many people, most academy training and qualification on the firing range consisted of shooting stationary paper targets during daylight hours, being told to draw your firearm, how to stand, how to grip the firearm, trigger control, etc. There was usually little pressure in performing these tasks. Officers have quickly noticed, real life-or-death situations are much different than compared to their training. Things happened much quicker, it was dark, someone was shooting back, and had to shoot from behind something just to name a few.

Do not misunderstand that basic fundamentals are very important in marksmanship during armed encounters. But that is just the foundation to build upon for your survival expertise. More agencies have updated their firearms training to involve more stressors by using multiple targets, moving targets, shooting in darkness, and simulating more realistic scenarios (Adams, et al, 1980).

The primary reason a person shuts down in the face of danger is fear. Fear is frequently described as a sense of anxiety due to the potential or real danger or pain. We need to use fear to our advantage and learn how to apply it to our work and play. Fear can raise situational awareness and awareness is the key to personal security. So anxiety of what we don't know or can't see may be justified and we must keep our fears in control and not let them run wild. Being overwhelmed with fear can cause you to shut down and put you in the mindset of accepting injury or death. One of the best ways to control fear is to turn it into controlled anger. By being prepared for conflict and being familiar with its consequences, you can take action and not be held back by fear.

It's natural to have a resistance to engagement, even in the minds of the highly skilled. But it should not be in the mind of the Law Enforcement Officer. We are trained to seek out danger and do it as safely as possible (Spaulding, 2012).

Fear is our way of having warning lights. It can be the ultimate stressor and has excessive arousal that reduces effective functioning. But fear can also have a positive aspect. It can be used as a readiness to respond and more importantly, is an identifier to use caution in responding to certain situations.

Fear of the unknown is a specific form of realistic fear. The best way to lessen this fear is to gain more experience. The more situations you put yourself in, you can more quickly respond to similar situations. Fear of the unknown is also linked to the "what-if" question. "What if I die?" "What if I get someone hurt?" You should always answer these questions even if the outcome is not pleasant. It will at least give you a plan and lessen the fear. However, if it goes unanswered, the fear will increase (Grossman, et al, 2010).

## Methods

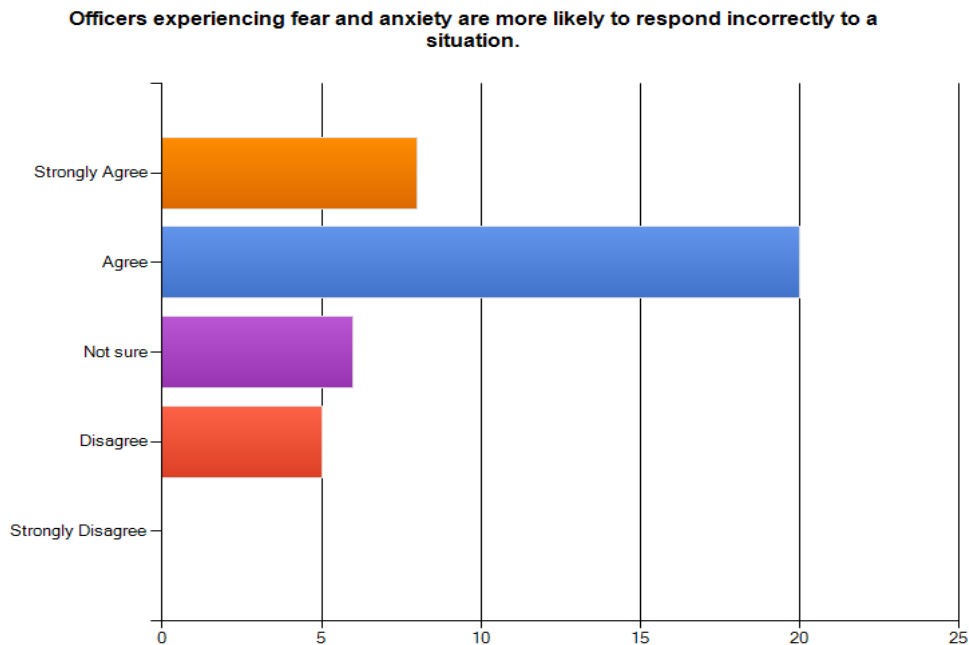
This research is being conducted to find out if fear has an effect on officer response in crisis situations. With officers being injured or killed in the line of duty, it is important to find out if fear is causing officers to hesitate or freeze before using the appropriate force necessary to stop the threat. Are their injuries occurring because of not taking immediate action? Are other people being injured because of the officer hesitating to react? If so, what is being done to assist officers to react more quickly and with more confidence?

The data was collected by surveys sent via email to 54 training officers. The sampling consisted of municipal, county, and state law enforcement agencies throughout the state of Florida. The survey was directed to agency training coordinators who are involved in high liability training areas. The main purpose of the survey was to find out if officers hesitate to react to crisis situations because of their own fear to engage. Did they or anyone else sustain injuries or death because of the officer's lack of response? Did they admit fear was the cause for them not to respond in a timely manner? Are there additional training methods to assist in overcoming these fears and hesitation?

## Results

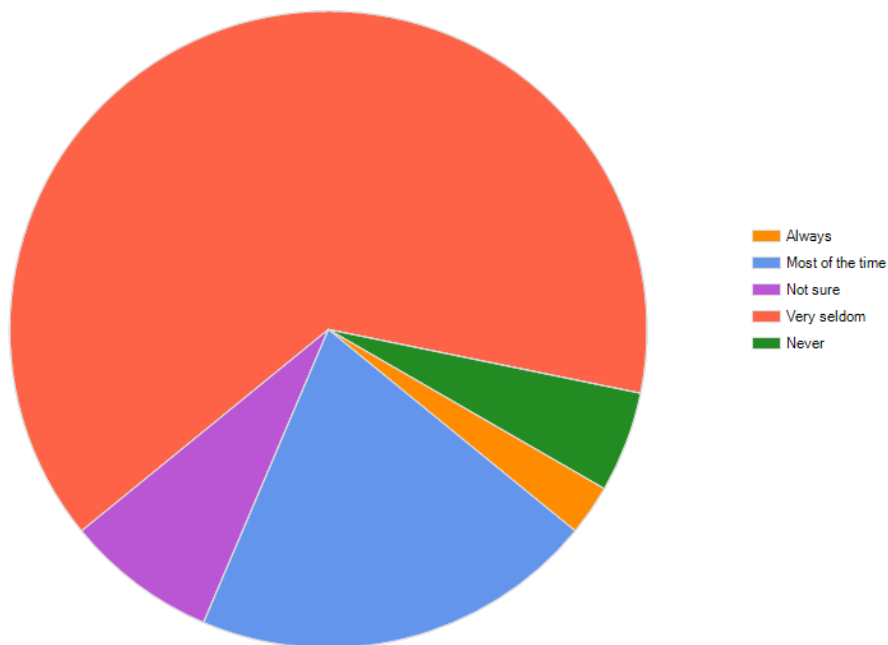
The survey created was sent out to fifty-four training officers who work with municipal, county, and state law enforcement agencies throughout the state of Florida. Of the fifty-four surveys sent out, thirty-nine were returned completed yielding a seventy-three percent response rate.

The first question wanted to know if officers experiencing fear and anxiety are more likely to respond incorrectly to a situation. A majority "agree" with this statement.



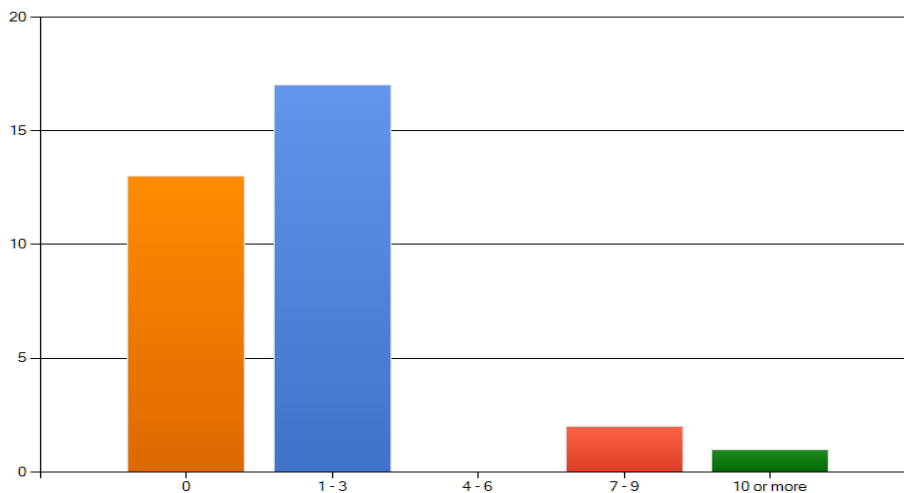
The trainers were asked if officers are able to admit if they are afraid to engage in a crisis situation. It was determined they are “very seldom” able to admit they are afraid.

**Officers are able to admit if they are afraid to engage in a crisis situation.**

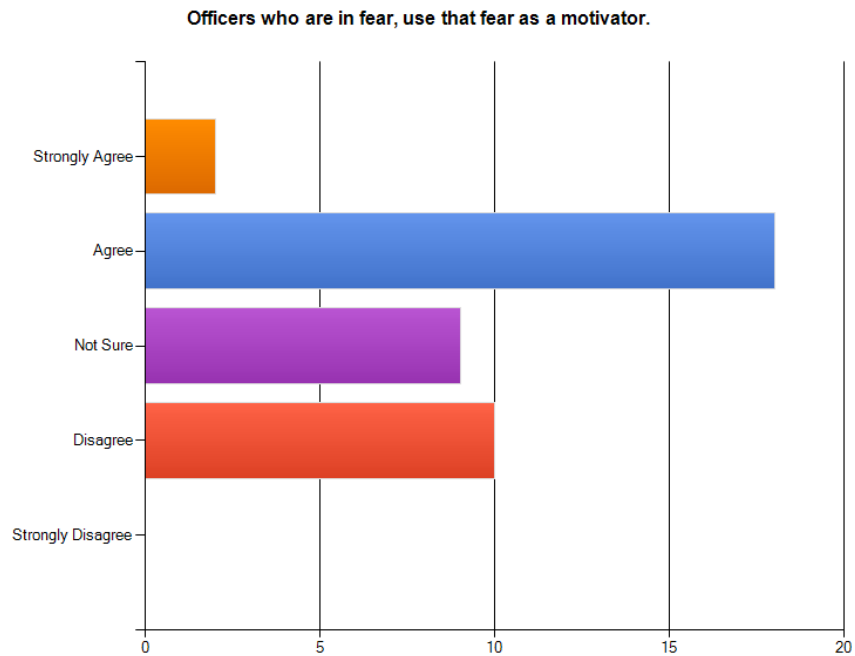


Another question asked the number of officers who received injuries by their hesitation to react to a threat to themselves or someone else. Six people skipped this question.

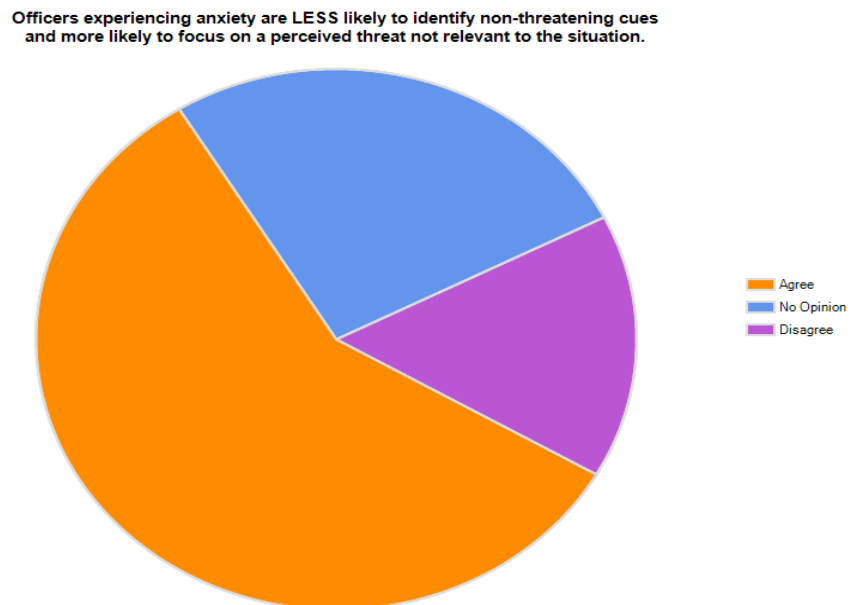
**In the past three years, how many officers in your agency have received injuries caused by their hesitation to react to a threat to themselves or someone else?**



The trainers were asked if officers use fear as a motivator. This appeared to get a more opinionated response.

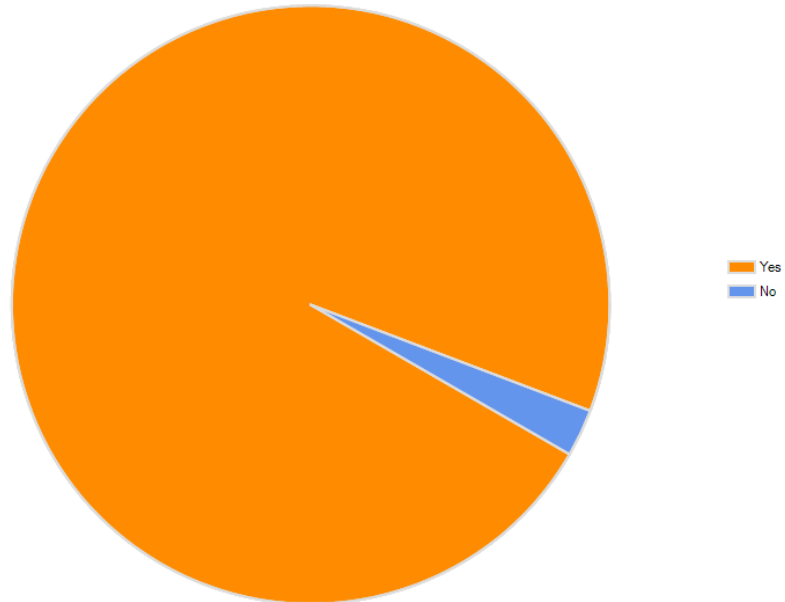


They were also asked if officers experiencing anxiety are less likely to identify non-threatening cues and more likely to focus on a perceived threat not relevant to the situation. One person skipped this question.



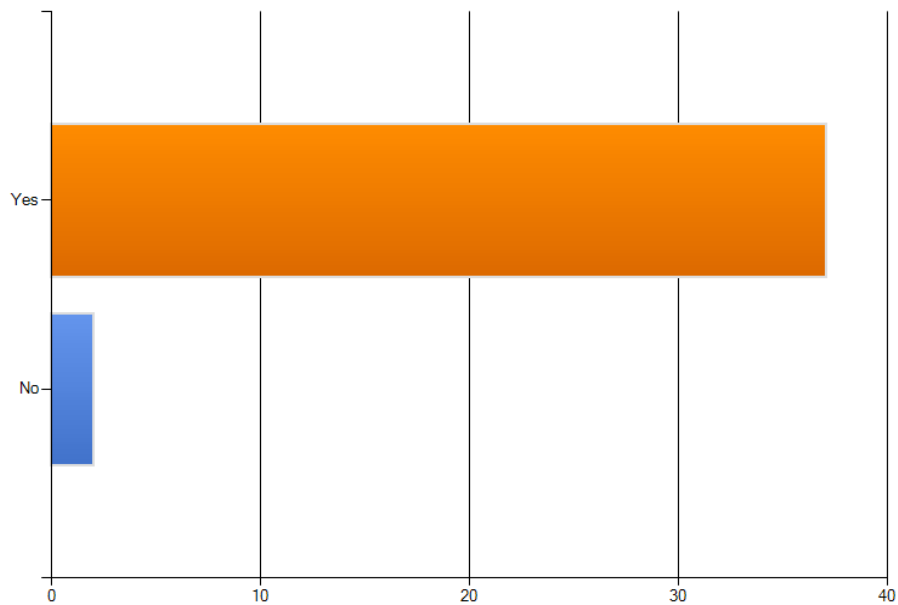
The trainers were asked if they have an in-service scenario based training program. This was an impressive ninety-seven percent response saying they did.

Do you have an in-service scenario based training program?

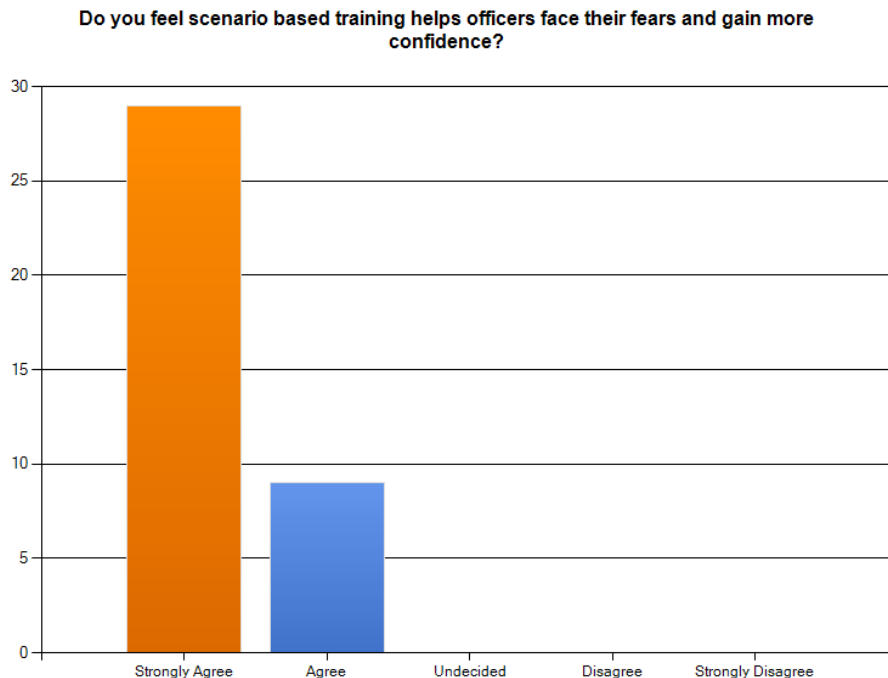


They were also asked if they include force-on-force during their training.

If yes to the above scenario based training question, do you use force-on-force training in your scenarios?



The last question asked of the trainers is if they feel scenario based training helps officers face their fears and gain more confidence. One person skipped this question.



## Discussion

With the information gathered from the survey, it appears agencies around the state of Florida may have some officers who hesitate to engage in a crisis situation. It is of the opinion of most trainers that officers who are experiencing fear and/or anxiety are more likely to respond incorrectly to a problem. There is also the belief these officers very seldom are able to admit they are afraid to take action or engage in a crisis situation. Of course, as we all know, there are different levels of crisis and some officers may react differently than others depending on their training and past experiences. However, this research has shown it is more likely for someone to be injured because they hesitated to take some sort of action. We are of different opinions if officers are using their fears as a motivator to get them through a situation. We may physically see how they are reacting but we do not know what they are thinking inside during the event.

It appears through this research, ninety-seven percent of the trainers taking the survey have a scenario based training program and most of them use force-on-force training. Trainers have seen the scenarios build confidence and decision making skills in the officers. Scenario based training is where we notice the hesitation to react based on the threat at hand.



## Recommendations

I would recommend for agencies to make scenario based training a priority during their annual in-service training. A block of time should be allocated to discuss how fear effects your decision making process. Officers need to know up front that fear, if used properly, can be a tool to get you through a situation as safely as possible. As we have heard before, any action is better than no action. Freezing or submitting to a deadly encounter is not an option. If they know the components of fear, they can redirect that energy to situational awareness and focus on getting themselves or someone else out of a critical situation.

Lieutenant David Henderson started his law enforcement career in 1996 with the Leon County Sheriff's Office Reserve Unit where he volunteered his time for 3 years before being hired full time with Capitol Police in June of 1999. He has been with them for 14 years and during that time he was a Field Training Officer. He was promoted to the rank of Sergeant in 2001. In 2003 he helped implement and was the team leader for the Capitol Police Critical Incident Team. He was promoted to the rank of Lieutenant in 2005 and worked in the Patrol Operations section. He is currently assigned to the administrative section as the accreditation liaison and supervises the Bomb Squad and Capitol I.D. Office.

## References

- Adams, R.J., McTernan, T.A., & Remsberg, C. (1980). *Street survival: Tactics for armed encounters*. (pp. 28-30). Northbrook, Illinois: Calibre Press, Inc.
- Asken, M., Grossman, D., & Christensen, L. (2010). *Warrior mindset: Mental toughness skills for a nation's peacekeepers*. (pp. 77-81). U.S.A.: Warrior Science Publications.
- Grossi, D. (2010, May). *Controlling fear and facing danger*. Retrieved from <http://www.policeone.com/Officer-Safety/articles/2058690-Controlling-fear-and-facing-danger/>
- Matta, C. (2012). Police officers more likely to shoot when anxious. *Psych Central*. Retrieved from <http://psychcentral.com/blog/archives/2012/11/04/police-officers-more-likely-to-shoot-when-anxious/>
- Spaulding, D. (2012 June/July). Fear is your friend. *Law Officer*, 8(6), 38-39.
- VanBlaricum, M. A. (2005, July). Combating conditioned hesitation. *Police, The Law Enforcement Magazine*. Retrieved from <http://www.usadojo.com/articles/michael-vanblaricum/combating-conditioned-hesitation.htm>

## **Appendix A**

### **Survey Questions**

**1. Officers experiencing fear and anxiety are more likely to respond incorrectly to a situation.**

- ☐ Strongly Agree
- ☐ Agree
- ☐ Not sure
- ☐ Disagree
- ☐ Strongly Disagree

**2. Officers are able to admit if they are afraid to engage in a crisis situation.**

- ☐ Always
- ☐ Most of the time
- ☐ Not sure
- ☐ Very seldom
- ☐ Never

**3. In the past three years, how many officers in your agency have received injuries caused by their hesitation to react to a threat to themselves or someone else?**

- ☐ 0
- ☐ 1 - 3
- ☐ 4 - 6
- ☐ 7 - 9
- ☐ 10 or more

**4. Officers who are in fear, use that fear as a motivator.**

- ☐ Strongly Agree
- ☐ Agree
- ☐ Not Sure
- ☐ Disagree
- ☐ Strongly Disagree

**5. Officers experiencing anxiety are LESS likely to identify non-threatening cues and more likely to focus on a perceived threat not relevant to the situation.**

- ☐ Agree
- ☐ No Opinion
- ☐ Disagree

**6. Do you have an in-service scenario based training program?**

- ☐ Yes
- ☐ No

**7. If yes to the above scenario based training question, do you use force-on-force training in your scenarios?**

- ☐ Yes
- ☐ No

**8. Do you feel scenario based training helps officers face their fears and gain more confidence?**

- ☐ Strongly Agree
- ☐ Agree
- ☐ Undecided
- ☐ Disagree
- ☐ Strongly Disagree