

The control and restraint of violent subjects is difficult enough when they are in an open environment and the officer has the ability to disengage and de-escalate a confrontation.

When violent confrontation takes place in a closed environment such as a prison cell or a room, the risk of injury to the officer and the subject is greatly increased.

In the Irish and Scottish prison system, a technique was pioneered which led to the development of the current technique and methodology relating to the use of a soft padded shield for the control of violent subjects. In the Maize prison, where high security IRA inmates are the norm, the insertion and extraction of violent prisoners are routine. The following techniques, using the "soft" padded shield, are a development of these initial methods.

For the past four years, members of the Queensland Public Safety Response Team (P.S.R.T.) have been involved in the development and evaluation of this technique and the associated equipment. Staff initially attended courses conducted by Law Enforcement Training Services, and the refinement of this technique can be solely credited to the chief instructor (retired Inspector NT Corrections), Des Morrison.

At a recent "less than lethal force" conference in Melbourne, a representative of the P.S.R.T. was quite surprised that the rest of Australia had not been exposed to what was becoming a highly successful method of restraining violent subjects without causing high levels of injury.

Members of the P.S.R.T. have operationally applied this technique in a number of situations against subjects in cells and rooms where the potential for violence and injury to both the subject and the officer has been extremely high. In one case, after being called to deal with the New Zealand kick-boxing champion who had been arrested at the International Airport, the subject submitted without further damage to the cell and injury to himself.

Several other applications of this technique have resulted in the control of violent subjects at watchhouses, with little or no injury to the subject (or the officer), and have achieved maximum control of highly aggressive persons in confined areas.

The Shield:

After several prototypes, the final version of the soft shield has been constructed with a cordura shell which encloses layers of high-density foam. In the middle section of the shield, a layer of knife-proof lexan has been inserted to ensure that some rigidity and extra protection are available for the user. The shield itself is a two-edged weapon. Whilst absorbing the impact from flails, such as baseball bats or improvised weapons, it also aids in the restraint of the subject through the application of force and the initiation of accelerated breath loss. As the extraction team (a basic team consists of three persons) engages the subject, the absorbing effect of the high-density foam lessens the rebound effect and increases the debilitating capacity by literally pushing the air out of the subject.

Armed Subjects:

In the situation where a person is armed (not counting firearms), the team is protected by the layers of foam and the lexan insert. One member may be assigned the task of specifically dealing with the weapon, and this person wears a set of slash-resistant gloves where edged weapons are involved. Other contingencies, such as OC spray and the provision of light and distraction, are always allocated to a fourth person not integral to the handling of the shield and the subject. Persons with edged weapons may be disarmed with minimal risk of injury to officers or to the subject using these techniques.

Verbalisation:

This technique makes constant use of correct verbalisation and dynamic verbal command. The terminology is set out for uniformity and is important to ensure consistency from member to member. This may appear to be a secondary consideration to the physical technique itself. However, application has shown that the correct verbalisation, whilst applying the technique, results in less resistive behaviour from the subject and increased confidence amongst the team members. In a correctional environment, the Irish Control and Restraint teams found that correctly verbalising had the residual effect of letting all the other prisoners (and potential subjects) know that the officers were behaving professionally and successfully against a previously vocal subject.

The team leader is responsible for verbalisation and communication with the subject. By using this simple tool well, the tone of the situation is set and the control of the subject can be achieved with less force and more control. All the time the subject is monitored through the provision of feedback, and the technique is aided by the subject's ability to focus on one voice only.

Hands-On Techniques:

It is fine to say that the soft shield is as effective as has been proven, but this is only the case where the operators have a high level of operational proficiency in the control and restraint of persons using traditional methods such as joint locks and manipulation and pressure point application. I should also note that this technique does not employ the application of pressure points above the neck. I should emphasise that the operators must have operational competency. It is not adequate to utilise staff that have not had cause to handle an aggressive or resistive person in the field for some time.

Once the subject is confronted using the shield, the team sets about a well rehearsed set of manoeuvres designed to apply restraints which systematically allow for the control of the subject. These are rehearsed to the point where each member of a well-trained team could fill any of the three roles with ease should the dynamics of a situation require it.

Through the use of balance displacement, motor dysfunction and ground stabilisation, an actively aggressive subject may be subdued with minimal use of force. The result is the complete control, restraint and removal of a violent subject with minimal injury to both the subject and the officers.

Training:

Before an operator can truly appreciate the effectiveness of this technique, it has to be experienced first hand. Training for members of the P.S.R.T. involves a yearly qualification on the P.S.R.T. Operators' Course, and retraining and application during the course of weekly training days (deployments permitting). Each officer is subjected to varying levels of application of this technique, with them as the subject, to enable an appreciation of its effectiveness and to instil a sense of confidence in the tactic's success. This training is extremely dynamic and as real to life as it can be.

The result is that the officers are confident that the technique will work; they are confident of their ability to apply it; and they are appreciative of how effective it is from the subject's point of view. The fact that it can be rehearsed and training can be done with such a high level of realism is further evidence of the lack of injury caused by the application of the technique on a resistive subject.

Application:

The technique is becoming widely utilised in hospitals for the control of emotionally disturbed persons, juvenile justice centres and correctional facilities around the country. It was recently introduced to the training of correctional staff in Mexican Prisons and to the Hong Kong Police Service. The shields utilised by P.S.R.T. are supplied by TOTE Systems in Brisbane.

Conclusion:

In Queensland, the responsibility for dealing with armed offenders of this nature lies with Operations Support Command; and this is just one of the uses of force options available to support members of the Queensland Police Service through the Specialist Services Branch.

It is very topical to be discussing less than lethal force options such as this. The current dilemmas faced by officers after shooting a knife-wielding subject, and the potential for injury to members asked to confront these situations, weigh heavily on each police officer's mind. It is important to remember that even though less than lethal options do exist, that police may be forced to take life when life is threatened and other available options have been exhausted.

Special thanks to the author:

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