

The Day My Narrow Mind Widened About Law Enforcement



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STEPPING INTO A SHOOT-DON'T SHOOT SIMULATION MADE A LOCAL NEWSCASTER APPRECIATE HOW THINGS CAN GO WRONG IN DEADLY FORCE SITUATIONS.

"POLICE SHOT THE MAN—and it turned out he was unarmed. Now let's check the forecast..."

I used to be one of those smirky TV newscasters who would say that line with a negative tone about law enforcement. How could police be so careless to shoot a guy who didn't even have a weapon, I'd ask myself. I'd been anchoring the news for 20 years and thought I knew it all.

That is until my phone rang and it was the FBI calling.

It was the head of the local division, a very nice guy who I knew socially. He made me an offer that morning I couldn't refuse.

"We have a new high-tech training simulator that we'd like you to experience, we'll even give you the 'exclusive,'" he offered.

Phrases like FBI and "exclusive" get attention in most news departments, and ours was no different. The next morning, my photographer and I arrived at the federal offices to go through an experience that changed my life-long paradigm in a matter of minutes.

In a large room in the department's basement was a wall-sized video screen that displayed various real-life scenarios. FBI trainers gave me a phony gun, had me stand in the middle of the room, and told me I would be a part of the video. The choices I made would alter the way the video veered off at critical junctures.

ROLL IT

THE VIDEO BEGAN and suddenly my "partner" on the screen turned toward me (the camera) as we walked up a driveway. He said in a hushed and urgent tone, "OK, we're going to approach this house and see if we can talk to a guy inside who is suspected in some high-profile crimes in the area. I'll knock on the door, you back me up."

The camera followed my partner up to the front door, as I immediately felt swept into the scene; my adrenalin began to build. The video was so lifelike, it absolutely felt like I was approaching a darkened house, even though I was actually standing safely in the basement of an FBI branch office holding a toy gun.

He knocked on the door as I stood behind him. A woman answered.

"Hi ma'am, I'm Detective Thompson. We'd like to talk to Jimmy Jones."

"Hang on. JIMMY?"

The man was home! My partner looked back at me one last time.

Jimmy Jones began walking from the back of the house toward the front door in a slow and cocky strut. As he got closer, my partner said, "Jimmy, we'd like to talk to you about an incident last weekend that we think you may be involved in."

After a brief exchange, Jimmy suddenly reached his hand in his pocket and pulled out what appeared to be a hand-gun.

"Bang!"

It was all over in a moment.

I shot him.

I saved my partner's life—not to mention my own.

The video went dark. The lights in the room came up. The FBI trainer asked me what just happened.

I said, "The guy was walking toward the door, heard why we were there, pulled out a gun—so I shot him before he could shoot us."

"Really? How do you know he had a gun?" he asked me.

Suddenly I realized my heroic action was being questioned.

"He pulled it out of his pocket as he approached us," I countered.

"Did you see it was a gun?"

I felt like I was being questioned by my parents about stealing a candy bar in the 5th grade.

RE-RACK IT

THE LIGHTS WENT DOWN, the projector began to roll again as I was told to watch what would have happened if I hadn't fired a shot: The man did indeed reach in his pocket and pulled something out: A comb.

It was a plastic comb! I was mortified. How could I have been so reckless?

I defended myself, "But he reached in his pocket while approaching two law enforcement officers, he's asking for trouble."

"Oh, we're not saying what he did was prudent, or what you did was wrong, and you may very well win that case in court. But how is it going to be portrayed in the media?"

"Police...shot...an unarmed man," I said, with my voice trailing off.

Trainers went on to play several more videos of various situations. I resisted the urge to shoot, sometimes I was right, sometimes my partner and I were killed for being tentative.

Never in my life do I recall my mindset being changed more quickly.

Since that morning 10 years ago, I've never again said, "Police shot an unarmed man" with a smirk in my voice. In fact, I'll do whatever I can to make the viewer understand the circumstances.

That FBI simulator was a good investment. ■FBINAA

Ray Collins is an award-winning TV and radio newscaster who now is a media trainer. You can hire him to teach your department how to deal with the media, or hire him to teach your local media how to deal with police. www.RayCollinsMedia.com