



## **Officer Training for Low-Light Conditions: A Matter of Life and Death**

According to recent news reports, on October 15, 2010 a narcotics officer in Texas shot and killed an unarmed suspected drug dealer as the officer moved in to arrest him; and on January 25, 2011 a police officer in New York shot and wounded an allegedly unarmed man while serving a warrant. As reported, each officer said he was trying to operate his pistol-mounted light when the weapon discharged.

We at SureFire are deeply saddened by these tragic events. Ensuring the safety, success, and survival of our warfighters and peacekeepers has always been the key element in SureFire's corporate mission.

The Texas and New York shootings reportedly involved pistol-mounted lights manufactured by SureFire. Although both shootings remain under investigation, we are confident these investigations will conclude that SureFire lights are safe and effective. According to news reports, a police spokesman for the Texas department said the department does not believe there is a problem with the flashlight in question or the way it is activated.

We take this opportunity to review the crucial benefits that weapon-mounted lights provide to police officers and the citizens they protect, and to emphasize the need for proper officer training in both the use of these lifesaving tools and in low-light tactics in general.

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In 1986 SureFire introduced the first light designed specifically for mounting on handguns. This light was quickly adopted by SWAT teams, including LAPD's D-Platoon. In 2004 SureFire introduced the current X-Series WeaponLights, intended primarily for attachment to handguns. There are well over 100,000 SureFire X-Series lights and tens of thousands of optional grip-activated "DG" and "SL" switches in use today, and our competitors have sold hundreds of thousands of other pistol-mountable lights themselves. During this 24-year period the only reported safety-related incidents involving such lights are the two incidents mentioned above. These figures alone prove that SureFire WeaponLights, and weapon-mounted lights in general, are safe.

We strongly believe that any department that does not permit its officers to use a weapon-mounted light increases the risk of wrongful shootings due to suspect or weapon misidentification, and the risk to its officers of serious injury or death due to the lack of illumination control in critical situations.

According to the NYPD (1996 SOP-9), as many as 77% of police shootings occur under some degree of diminished light. Yet most departments continue to dedicate a small percentage of firearms and tactics training to realistic low-light conditions. In an



analysis conducted by Tom Aveni of the Police Policy Studies Council ([www.theppsc.org](http://www.theppsc.org)), over a 13-year span the Baltimore County PD (which Mr. Aveni regards as one of the best trained in the country) achieved an average hit ratio of 64% in daylight shootings. In shootings that occurred in low-light conditions the average hit ratio dropped to 45%—a decline of 30%. Mr. Aveni determined that as much as 18% to 33% of law enforcement shootings are of the “mistake-in-fact” variety, i.e., when a suspect displays an item that is mistakenly believed to be a deadly weapon or engages in furtive behavior that is mistakenly perceived to be threatening. As many as 75% of the “mistake-of-fact” shootings examined by Mr. Aveni occurred at a time of day “we'd generally associate with reduced light conditions.”

In a New York Post article about the NYPD shooting mentioned above, a person identified as a firearms expert was quoted as stating, “When you put a flashlight on a weapon system, there are numerous things that you have to manipulate, and under stress, things are more difficult...” While we agree that under stress things are more difficult, by eliminating the need to hold, point, and activate a handheld light, a weapon-mounted light actually reduces the complexity of illuminating a threat as soon as lethal force is deemed potentially necessary. It's worth noting that the same purported firearms expert testified as an expert witness in connection with the 1999 Amadou Diallo shooting. In that case, four NYPD officers shot and killed an unarmed suspect in low-light conditions. As reported, the officers were operating under the belief that Diallo, who appeared to match the description of a serial rapist and initially ran away from the officers, was brandishing a weapon, which later proved to be his wallet. It is very likely that this tragedy, and the resulting \$3,000,000 settlement, could have been avoided if the officers had been equipped with weapon-mounted lights and adequate low-light training.

Every experienced law enforcement officer we know would agree that, in use-of-force situations that occur in diminished-light conditions, supplemental lighting is necessary for sound decision-making and effective action. Adequate illumination is required both before the decision to pull the trigger is made, and as the officer is firing. These officers also would agree that a proper two-handed grip is required for optimal accuracy. While flashlight/handgun-shooting techniques can be effective, they do not allow the full two-handed grip and the degree of stability afforded by a pistol-mounted light.

Consider the rapidly evolving nature of threat situations: Time does not always permit the use of a handheld light; an officer may need to draw his or her weapon immediately. In such time-critical situations, an officer equipped with a pistol-mounted light has an instant source of illumination in hand, which can be crucial to proper decision-making and, indeed, to survival. Both handheld and weapon-mounted lights are important safety tools. Handheld lights may be preferable in circumstances when the threat of a lethal-force encounter is low, but they are not optimal in lethal-force situations. Should an officer equipped only with a handheld flashlight have cause to present and/or discharge his or her weapon, they must either use a one-handed grip with a consequent decrease in accuracy, or hold the flashlight and weapon together in a less than optimal grip. Activating a pistol-mounted light is much more mechanically efficient and,



consequently, is much quicker and easier to use than a handheld flashlight and has the added benefit of improved accuracy under stress.

Every piece of equipment issued to an officer requires training to be used effectively. Flashlights and weapon-mounted lights are no exception. The Four Basic Rules of Firearms Safety are taught to every academy cadet and posted within virtually all police and civilian shooting ranges. While each of these rules are equally important, two of them are particularly pertinent to the use of weapon-mounted lights:

Rule #2: Keep your finger off the trigger until your sights are on target and you are ready to fire.

Rule #3: Never point your weapon at anything you are not willing to injure or destroy.

These rules must be fully ingrained in law enforcement officers by means of proper training of sufficient quality and frequency.

Proper training is required not only to enhance officer safety and to avoid accidental shootings, but also to protect departments and municipalities against financial liability. The courts can and will hold a municipality liable for failure to adequately train its police force. See, e.g., *City of Canton v. Harris*, 489 U.S. 378 (1989); *Zuchel v. Denver*, 997 F.2d 730 (10th Cir. 1993). And law enforcement agencies must conduct firearms training that is realistic, and that reflects the environment the officers are likely to encounter. See, e.g., *Popow v. City of Margate*, 476 F.Supp. 1237 (Dist. N.J. 1979). Unfortunately, many police agencies still have not developed such training. The failure to have appropriate and realistic “decisional” training with respect to the use of deadly force is a risk that agencies cannot afford to take.

We believe that weapon-mounted lights are crucial safety-enhancing tools for law enforcement officers, and that departments and municipalities must provide training adequate to the task. Too often officers are placed under extreme duress in complex, rapidly evolving, life-or-death situations without the necessary equipment and/or training. To that end, SureFire is developing and will release free of charge to any U.S. law enforcement agency a comprehensive multi-media training course curriculum entitled *Low-Light Safety & Survival: Tools, Tactics, and Techniques*. These materials will provide departments with a training format based on 15 years of testing and teaching low-light tactics and Officer Survival at the SureFire Institute.

In closing, we offer these reminders for the safe use of weapons used in conjunction with weapon-mounted lights or any other piece of equipment:

Keep your finger off the trigger until your sights are on target and you are ready to fire.

Never point your weapon at anything you are not willing to injure or destroy.

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