

Simulator helps cops learn when to shoot

'Laser system tests cops' reaction time, judgement

By James Radebaugh
staff writer

A police officer has to know how to use a service revolver — but he or she also has to know when to use it, and when not to.

Traditionally, officers have received their training at the shooting range, firing at paper targets. That took care of learning how to shoot.

Now, West Bloomfield and other area police departments have something they hope will help them learn when to shoot.

A computerized simulator bought jointly by the township and four neighboring communities recreates those split-second situations when an officer has to decide: kill or risk being killed.

"Once you concentrate, it puts you into the scenario and you begin reacting to what's on the screen," said police Officer Bridget Ryan after her first experience with the simulator. "It raises your heartbeat a little bit."

THE SIMULATOR projects a life-size video image onto a large screen. The officer stands back approximately 15 feet, armed with either a .357-caliber revolver or a shotgun. Both guns are modified to shoot a laser beam instead of a bullet.

As one of several scenarios unfolds, the officer is expected to react as if he or she were on the job, including addressing verbal commands to the characters on the screen. The computer notes when the officer shoots and when he or she doesn't.

After the scenario plays itself out, the officer's performance, including reaction time, shooting accuracy and judgment, is displayed on the screen.

IT'S NOT easy, not even for officers who have been through firearm training.

Sgt. Mike Madigan said he watched one of the scenarios several times before he noticed a jogger running in the background of a situation that would warrant use of his firearm. He also said that he fired his gun on instinct, rather than taking care to line up the sight as he would at the shooting range.

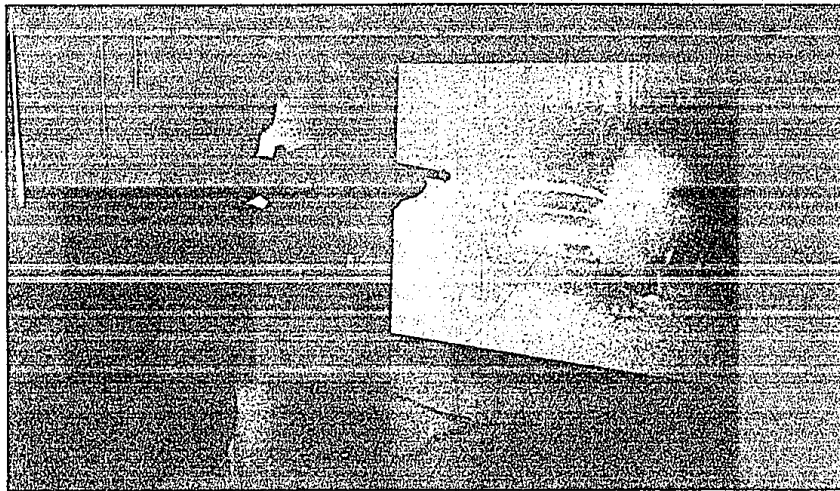
One scenario goes like this: You're told an alarm has been tripped at a savings and loan. You're also told that the alarm at this savings and loan has been tripped accidentally several times in the past. Remember that everything happens in seconds.

Your partner on the screen tells you he'll go inside and take a look while you stay outside. No big deal. He enters the building and moments later the sound of a gunshot is heard from within.

Seconds later a man — not your partner — runs out the door flailing his arms. Do you shoot?

If so, you may kill an innocent man. The man shouts at you that a robbery is in progress and leaves your field of vision. A moment later the robber flies out of the door and takes a shot at you. If you hesitate this time, you're dead.

IN ANOTHER scenario, you're escorting a celebrated ambassador, a few steps behind, as he walks down the sidewalk. A man walking toward you turns suddenly and crouches in a



West Bloomfield officer Joe Chapin, a firearms instructor, put himself through the paces, using the scenario of stopping a fleeing vehicle.

shooting position. From behind, you don't see what he's doing. A second later he stands up, pockets his camera and thanks the ambassador.

In still another scenario, you've just stepped out of your patrol car after pulling over a an old junker registered to a felon thought to be armed and dangerous. The driver gets out of the car and runs away. Do you shoot an unarmed man in the back? You're not supposed to. Do

you lower your weapon and approach the car casually? Not if you don't want to be shot, assuming the passenger opens fire.

Firearm trainers hope that by watching these scenarios, officers will learn to expect the unexpected without jumping to conclusions.

EACH OF West Bloomfield's 50 officers spent 20-30 minutes training with the simulator during three days

last week. West Bloomfield will have use of the simulator, which cost nearly \$40,000, for two months each year. It will be shared with Farmington, Farmington Hills, Novi and Franklin, the communities that helped buy it.

While West Bloomfield officers said they hope the simulator will help them learn their jobs better, they also hope publicity about it will help the public understand the pres-

sure that officers are under when they decide to use their weapons.

An officer who kills an innocent person will probably be suspended, vilified and sued on top of feeling terrible, according to Madigan. One who fails to shoot when he should could wind up dead, according to Lt. Greg Roberts.

"It doesn't happen often, but it only takes once," Roberts said.

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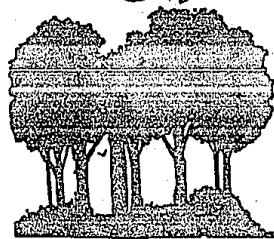
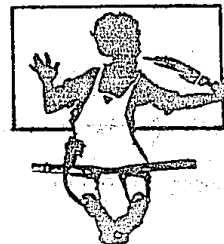
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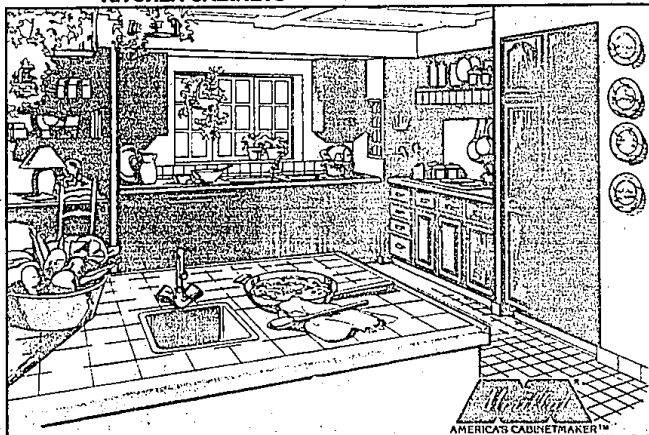
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