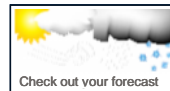


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Police marksmanship goes high-tech

Laconia:

By JOHN KOZIOL
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Thursday, March 18, 2010

Police officers have to make life-and-death decisions every day and now, thanks to some cutting-edge technology, Laconia's finest will be able to first practice making those decisions virtually before then having to make them in the real world.



DARYL CARLSON/CITIZEN PHOTO LACONIA POLICE Officer Matt Canfield demonstrates the new interactive shooting range that allows officers to simulate a variety of crime scenarios for officer training.

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This week the LPD joined Hudson in becoming only the second police department in New Hampshire to begin using the MILO Range PRO HD system, which is manufactured by IES Interactive Training Inc. of Ann Arbor, Mich.

The high-definition interactive simulator trains officers to respond to more than 400 scenarios as well as allowing the department to create its own scenarios, which so far include a canine unit response at the former Lakes Region Facility prison where a suspect has to be flushed out from behind a tree.

Used since 2000 by, among others, the U.S. Secret Service, FBI, Drug Enforcement Agency, the Los Angeles Police Department and the Army, Navy and Coast Guard as well as law enforcement agencies around the world, the MILO Range PRO HD system also allows Laconia officers to brush up on their range shooting skills, practice that will come in handy when they have to fire a real gun with real bullets as part of their twice-a year, state-required certification.

Lt. Matt Canfield, LPD's training officer, said the simulator cost about \$50,000, all of which was covered by a federal grant to the department.

"We are extremely excited that we will be able to improve our training and decision-making skills in the area of deadly force and lethal force confrontations," Chief Mike Moyer said. "This training tool will not only improve the skills of our officers, but enable us to be better prepared to protect the citizens of our community."

The simulator, which is housed in the attic of the LPD headquarters building on New Salem Street, is comprised of a computer system that projects life-size video and graphics-based exercises that simulate real-life situations onto a large screen.

Officers are equipped with laser-modified versions of the tools they already carry — a Glock handgun, pepper spray and flashlight — and are directed by the training officer to prepare to respond to a scenario. Among the scenarios built into the system are domestic disputes — which are among the department's most frequent calls for service, Moyer said — fights, car stops and robberies.

The scenario unfolds in front of the officer, who then acts to control the situation either by voice command or by using a weapon or a combination. The training officer controls the "suspect" and can make him or her comply with the officer's commands or, as Canfield demonstrated for Officer Ben Black on Wednesday afternoon, come out shooting or swinging at the officer.

Black, who has been summoned to a "bank robbery," is expecting trouble and he has already drawn his "handgun" as the scenario unfolds. He observes a man running out of the bank carrying a bag and yells at him to stop; Canfield makes the suspect stop but then has him draw a weapon and aim it at Black.

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In milliseconds, Black has squeezed off four shots and the suspect is "down." Later, Black and Canfield can review exactly where every one of Black's and the suspect's bullets went. Because Black is being record by a video camera, he can study what he did right, what he did wrong and come up with a plan to what he can do better next time.

For the purpose of the demonstration, however, Black has been shot and is presumably injured because while concentrating on the suspect coming out of the bank, he failed to consider the suspect's accomplice, who is armed and sitting in the driver's seat of a nearby getaway car.

"I got focused on the one guy there and that's a fatal error," Black conceded, later rerunning the scenario and coming out with a different, more satisfactory outcome. The scenario was also run in low-light conditions, something that Laconia Police have to work in frequently, said Canfield, but which the department, until now, was not equipped to train in.

The idea behind the simulator is to minimize the use of force and provide officers with training that they might not otherwise be able to receive while also diminishing the city's liability in situations where an officer may have to use his or her weapon.

"Shootings are fraught with liability, even a good shot," explained Moyer, because of the risk that the victim of a police shooting may contest its appropriateness in a lawsuit against the department. Having documentable proof that officers are trained to exercise restraint and use a minimum of force is a powerful counter to that happening, he said.

In addition to scenarios, the MILO Range PRO HD system lets the LPD do some range shooting of the type it will need to do in real life for its semi-annual certifications. A second Glock is used, this one containing not only a laser to make hits on the target but also a gas-powered action in its magazine that simulates a slight recoil.

"This simulator will allow us to train more on a regular basis without the use of overtime or dedicated training days," Canfield said. "Regular periodic training will result in officers being better prepared for making appropriate, split-second use-of-force decisions if faced with such a situation."

Officers can learn from their mistakes without any negative consequences, Moyer said.

"If they are going to make an error, we'd rather have it made in the simulation training room where it can be corrected and learned from, rather than out on the streets where someone could get hurt," he said.

To underscore that point, Black, in another version of the bank robbery scenario, was confronted by the suspect, who threw the bag he was carrying at Black and lunged at him. In response, Black delivered two fatal shots at what, Moyer pointed out, was then an unarmed subject.

The simulator, because of its ability to generate a myriad of scenarios that can then be altered and studied forward, backward and sideways, will hopefully help make Laconia a safer place for both police officers and residents, Canfield said.

"The biggest thing is for officers to recognize the threat and to respond without hesitation," he said.

For Black, the simulator offers the chance "to learn and survive."

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