

The Dilemma of the Patrol Rifle

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Many police departments either allow the carry of, or are issuing pistol caliber carbine or .223 rifles for patrol use. This trend is too long in coming and those departments who do not have this type of program should seriously consider it. And, agencies that are adopting pistol caliber carbines should consider the fact that they still have just a pistol round that is now fired out of a longer barrel.

The benefits of having a patrol rifle are increased citizen / officer safety, increased accuracy, and the ability to make a precise shot at greater distances. The rifle/carbine is user friendly, in that smaller framed officers tend to favor them over the heavy recoil of the shotgun. I do not however advocate replacing the shotgun with the patrol rifle. The shotgun has its place in police work and should not be discounted.

The drawback of the pistol caliber carbine is simple. You still have a pistol round with about 100 feet per second added to the velocity. The pistol caliber carbine does not have the ability to defeat an armed adversary using body armor or taking cover behind barriers. Such rounds will penetrate further than most .223 rounds in residential construction found in homes.

This article is not about which rifle /carbine is best suited to law enforcement needs. Instead I want to illustrate the failings suffered by many of our area departments who have a patrol rifle program. The majority of departments that have a patrol rifle program already in place suffer from policy restrictions as to use and deployment. I have seen many departmental policies that so severely restrict the use and deployment of the patrol rifle that it makes the rifle virtually worthless and creates an officer safety concern.

Many of these policies are borne out of lack of knowledge. It is a lack of understanding of the weapons ballistic characteristics, its capabilities and limitations that causes unrealistic restrictions to be imposed. Unrealistic policies spread like a cancer when a department seeks out a flawed patrol rifle policy of another department as a basis to formulate a patrol rifle policy for their department.

Hence, administrative ignorance occurs because most administrative personnel at the level where policies are formulated are not well educated when it comes to weaponry and its proper applications and use. This ignorance is multiplied when those responsible for formulating policies fail to seek out those who are knowledgeable in weaponry.

The patrol rifle is no different from the handgun and shotgun carried by any officer. But there are departments that place restrictions on the deployment of the patrol rifle because of their administrative ignorance.

FACT: The patrol shotgun, using 00-buck ammunition has 8-9 .33 caliber projectiles traveling down range with one single pull of the trigger and these pellets are lethal up to 200 yards.

FACT: The patrol shotgun, using either a Sabot or Foster style one-ounce slug pushes a one ounce piece of lead down range for a lethality range of 880 yards. Slugs that are not of the Foster style will penetrate both car doors and keep going, destroying anything in their path.

FACT: The common 9mm, .40 or .45 caliber handgun will penetrate tissue simulant

10% ballistic gelatin further than most .223 ammunition. This is also true of
barrier penetration.

FACT: Most .223 ammunition has less penetration / ricochet potential than commonly

issued law enforcement handgun ammunition.

The truth, corroborated by fact is that the common patrol shotgun is more dangerous as to over penetration and ricochet than any pistol caliber carbine or .223. A shotgun loaded with any type of slug ammunition is a most deadly weapon, one which is capable of inflicting catastrophic injuries that are unmatched by the carbine or .223.

Yet, I have not found any department that restricts the deployment of the patrol shotgun. Then why would any department want to restrict the deployment of the patrol rifle? Answer, administrative misunderstanding and the desire to be politically correct, sometimes sacrificing officer safety to do so.

Because police officers are invested with the highest authority and responsibility, we must trust officers to carry out their duties free of unworkable rules. If any officer unnecessarily displays a weapon I would rather let the complaints come individually so they can be addressed individually, than go to an officers funeral because he was restricted in deploying the proper weapon for the situation.

I believe placing restrictions on weapon deployment is unworkable. Why take the officer's judgment away from him/her in a crisis situation? This is when they need it most. Only the personnel on the scene are in the best position to determine what equipment, weapons and tactics are best suited for the circumstances at hand. Remotely managing officer actions prior to need is both futile and misdirected. If we try to micromanage the officer on the street from the 5th floor all it will do is get the officer or citizen injured or worse. Policy should not handcuff officers and prevent appropriate action. Any "problems" or issues with deploying a weapon should be dealt with afterward.

The caveat. "A member will not needlessly endanger themselves to conform with the contents of this order " should be placed in every police policy manual. Or, have a policy that states officers will not unnecessarily display a firearm.

If there is a complaint and the officer cannot justify the display or use of the weapon, then it should be dealt with individually. This matter is one of training. An officer must have the latitude to act for his or her safety and that of the public.

The reason an officer carries a handgun is because it fits in holsters and can be secured and concealed. Handguns were never meant to be the primary weapon in any armed confrontation.

The axiom, ' Never take a handgun to a gunfight still holds true today. '

What needs to be learned about the patrol rifle is fact, not what Hollywood shows on the big screen. I have heard some administrators voice their concerns about what the community will think when they see officers armed with assault type rifles?

To reply to their concerns consider the following. First, people in our country who own personal firearms, handguns, long guns and assault type rifles far out number the 740,000 police officers in our country. Secondly, in the 17 years I have been in law enforcement I have never heard any citizen complain that the police were overly armed. Instead, what we hear too often are phrases like, the cops are out gunned, the bad guys have better weapons than the cops. I think we have all heard at one time or another catch phrases like these.

Third, because of the deadly terrorist strikes of September 11th our country has been forever changed. Our police are now tasked with even more demands and yet most police agencies do not have the necessary equipment to meet them.

Administrators should focus on getting our officers the necessary tools that will enable them to perform their duties, safely and effectively.

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