

Back to school

Police learn how to handle deadly situations safely

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ST. CLOUD, FLORIDA - Four law-enforcement officers stormed the dimly lit home-improvement store where trigger-happy gunmen terrorized customers and employees.

"Police department! Coming in, coming in!" the first officer yelled.

The cops didn't know how many they were up against or who was inside. Without

warning, gunshots rang out, and two officers

were hit as a siren wailed a warning. Another officer returned fire, killing the shooter.



Police officers (St. Cloud PD Tactical Team Member Brian Demeulenaere) train at the old Haunted House in Kissimmee on Thursday.

Fortunately, the scenario was only a drill in a defunct haunted-house attraction on the U.S. Highway 192 tourist strip, not in a real store. The "bad guy" was really a police academy student, and the "hostages" were actually St. Cloud Police Explorers.

The exercise, which attracted law-enforcement officers from Central and South Florida and as far away as Illinois, was part of a weeklong program designed to sharpen the skills of cops dealing with the realities of modern law enforcement: Columbine-style school shootings; gunmen at a mall and terrorist attacks.

"We want to train our officers to deal with the situation and not just sit back and wait [for

expert backup]," said St. Cloud police Chief Patrick Kelly, whose department hosted the training that ended Friday.

Two dozen officers worked 12- and 13-hour days, learning how to quickly and safely push bystanders out of the way during a school or store shooting, find a gunman hiding in a workplace, and disarm an attacker fast and with little or no bloodshed.



Gerry Hamilton of the Port St. Lucie Police Department wipes paint from his mask during a live-fire paint-gun training program Wednesday. 'The paint tastes awful,' Harrington said after the paint splattered into his mouth. 'It tastes like sweaty socks.'

Keeping cool and working together are key, students said. The adrenaline remained under control as each small group rushed the Haunted House.

"It's the communication and just keeping calm," said St. Cloud police Officer Keith Sonnabend, 32. "That's the major thing here. If you don't keep calm, that's it. You're dead."

At the St. Cloud police gun range, the officers maneuvered among wood barricades that simulated walls and hallways as they shot at each other with paintballs that looked like green fluorescent gumballs and stung on contact. The idea was for a team of three to work together as each other's eyes and ears, using the angles of their bodies efficiently.

"It gives us a more realistic viewpoint of being in a gunfight, and it prepares us to come out of there without any officers or any hostages or innocent people being hurt," said Kissimmee police Officer Fred Rivers, 32, as he displayed green paint splatters on his shirt from practice combat with a team from St. Cloud.

Trainers set different scenarios, using St. Cloud Middle and High schools in the evening and the old haunted house, to give officers a chance to react to surprises.

"Every situation is different," said Mark Warren, director of training for Strategos International, the Missouri-based police and military training company that conducted the workshop. The firm was started by a two men: a former director of anti-terrorism programs for the U.S. Navy and a SWAT officer.

Techniques the officers learned are useful when executing search warrants or arrest warrants in homes, a ticklish and potentially dangerous situation, St. Cloud police Maj.

Darryl Holliday said. Proper movement, balance, breathing, timing, relaxation and posture are essential, students said.

"You systematically eliminate every advantage your opponent has," said Cpl. Bob Brown, 41, of the Collier County sheriff's SWAT team.

"You're almost invincible."



Law-enforcement officers take cover behind barriers during a live-fire training program Wednesday at the St. Cloud Police Department gun range. Teams work as each other's eyes and ears.

Many of the officers who attended the sessions are members of SWAT teams or trainers who will teach the techniques to other cops. The five-day session cost \$795 per person, although St. Cloud received a discount, Kelly said.

This is the second nationally known training program hosted by St. Cloud police since Kelly took the helm of the department nearly two years ago. In January, famed Brazilian jujitsu expert Royce Gracie taught officers from across the country how to make criminals submit through leverage and immobilizing holds.