

COPS UNDER FIRE!

Twelve gripping stories of real-life police shootouts (and what to make of them)

Brian McKenna

an imprint of Sunbury Press, Inc.



OXFORD SOUTHERN

Mechanicsburg, PA USA

Contents

Author's Notes and Disclaimer	vii
Foreword	ix
Acknowledgments	xi
Introduction	1

Chapters

1. A Warrior's Sacrifice: The Keith Borders Case	7
2. In Defense of Others: The Eric Nelson, Luke Ross Case	23
3. Doing Something is Always Better Than Doing Nothing: The Herb Cuadras Case	36
4. Taking the Fight to the Enemy: The Joe Eagan Case	49
5. Tragedy Averted: The Nick Ekovich Case	63
6. Unarmed Lethal Encounters: The Mark Elliott, Allen Beckman Case	79
7. Winning Mindset/Warrior Spirit: The Ronald Griffin Case	96
8. To the Sound of the Guns: The Jake Laird, Tim Conley, Pete Koe Case	109
9. Never Say Die: The Bryan Power Case	123
10. Tough Call, Tragic Ending: The Nicholas Reed, J.T. Thomas, Mitch Allen Case	138
11. God, the Gunman, and the Warrior Cop: The Jeanne Assam Case	162
12. Selfless Focus: The Brian Murphy Case	175
Conclusion	189
Addendum: Racism in Policing and the Aftermath of George Floyd's Death	193
Endnotes	207
Index	209
About the Author	210

Introduction

When I told a friend what I wanted to accomplish with this book, she asked, “In other words, you want your readers to *feel* what it’s like to be a cop in a fight for your life?” It was an insightful comment that expressed my feelings in the most concise manner possible, and it also got me thinking. Since the infamous Ferguson shooting, I have the realization that much of the criticism against the police is rooted in the fact that most people have no idea what it is like to be a cop and know even less about the realities of officer-involved shootings. The harsh truth is that armed encounters are terrifying, chaotic, and ever-changing, with everything happening so fast that there is hardly time to think. To survive, the officer must be skilled, quick-thinking, and highly adaptable to ever-changing dangers under enormous stress.

Contrary to what is portrayed on television, cops are not immune to fear, nor are they particularly well trained. They are certainly not trained to a level comparable to elite military units, professional athletes, or anything even remotely close to either one, as many citizens seem to believe. This misconception is often promoted by police leaders who assert that American police officers are the best trained officers in the world, but this is untrue and misleading. In truth, while some of our officers are exceptionally well trained, most are trained to minimal standards that are barely adequate for the job, and none are trained up to the superhuman standards that many Americans expect of them. This misconception is especially concerning because it can lead the public to believe that our officers are so well trained that any questionable use of police force is motivated by malice or racism, rather than inadequate training or the confusion, fear, and dangerous surprises so common to violent confrontations.

Another popular misconception often propagated in the media is that many police officers are brutes who regularly default to deadly force when threatened. After over 32 years as a police officer, more than 30 years of researching police shootings, and well over 20 years of instructing police offi-

cers in tactics, officer safety, mindset, and lawful use of force, I can say without reservation that nothing can be further from the truth.

This is not meant to imply that our police officers never use excessive force. The sad truth is that police officers are fallible human beings. They are not immune to overreacting under stress or even out of fear or anger, and a minuscule few are brutes who disgrace the badge. However, it is absurd to say that any but the tiniest minority would even consider maliciously shooting another human being without adequate justification. With rare exception, they have the highest regard for human life, as is so often proven by their selfless willingness to put their lives on the line to help others.

Furthermore, officers are trained to use great restraint in the use of deadly force, reinforced by frequent reminders of the severe legal, career, financial, and emotional consequences of using excessive force of any sort. Many officers fear making such mistakes more than they do a violent death. To lump all of our courageously dedicated officers into the popular stereotype of trigger-happy thugs is no less damaging and unjust than grouping any other group of people into such negative stereotypes.

No conflict between human beings can hope to end well until all parties begin to understand one another's perspective on the issues involved. I am convinced that police work is one of the most misunderstood professions in America today. The growing rift between the police and the public is ripe with distrust fueled mainly by this misunderstanding about the police, police training, and the dynamics of armed police encounters. I hope that by helping build a greater understanding of these and many other elements related to violent police-citizen confrontations, this book will help heal that rift, improve police-community relations, and reduce violence between the police and their citizens.

This is not my only goal in writing this book, however. I also want to show the heroism of our police officers. They are human, of course, and—sadly—some may not be entirely up to the task, but the great majority are highly committed to protecting their citizens. For many of them, the most rewarding part of the job is knowing that they are one of the chosen few whose duty is to protect their fellow citizens, even at the risk of death. They are the ones who run to the sound of the guns, and they feel honored to do it. Heroism requires more than just doing something dangerous. People who face danger because it pays well, or just for the thrill of it, are brave and should be recognized as such. But they aren't heroes. Heroism requires a selfless willingness to make sacrifices for others. The cops in this book are true heroes, and it is important to know who they are and what they have done. I also trust their stories will make it clear that

there are many more like them, courageously ferreting out and confronting those who threaten our property, security, and even our lives and the lives of our loved ones.

Finally, I hope to pass on the gift these courageous officers gave me—lessons learned from the challenging experiences they endured and overcame. These officers have many essential traits in common, many of which came naturally to them. But they had to develop others deliberately, and anyone can similarly learn them. By learning them and ingraining them into your habits, they will be there for you if you ever need them. While the bulk of these traits are most applicable to violent confrontations with human adversaries, they can be applied to various other severe trials as well, including accidents, serious illnesses, financial setbacks, personal/family problems, etc. Life is sometimes hard and even cruel, but the mental toughness, courage, and tenacity of the officers in this book can inspire us to persist against all odds during these trying times. We owe it to them to honor their sacrifices by learning as much as we can from them.

Similarly, as you read through the book, you will also see various tips I have gleaned from these brave officers' stories, my law enforcement career, and my police training that you can use to help keep you and your loved ones safe. I added these items as they occurred to me to add value to this rather unusual self-help book.

HOW TO USE THIS BOOK

This book is loosely based on an earlier book I wrote exclusively for law enforcement. In that book, I recounted stories about officers involved in deadly encounters, followed by analyses of their actions for learning points related to officer safety. The book was well-received in the law enforcement community and often used in training, but its distribution was limited to police officers because it revealed many vulnerabilities that threaten the safety of our officers.

In this book, I have endeavored to do the same thing for my fellow citizens by following the same format of stories about police officers, followed by analyses of what we can learn from them. However, instead of focusing my analyses on lessons related to officer's safety, I offer lessons appropriate for any citizen interested in gaining a better understanding of the dangers our officers face every day, the dynamics of armed police encounters, how to stay safe, and how to deal with the various challenges of life. To gain maximum value from these

stories, I recommend that you read them deeply with the intent of learning as much as you can. Read each story carefully and pause at key points to predict what might happen next, how you would approach the situation confronting the officer, and how various options might affect the outcome. Then read the analyses in the same careful manner. Analyze each suggestion critically and try to determine how it can apply to your life. Ask yourself if there is a better way to achieve the same purpose, and try to anticipate what suggestions I might offer next. This will help you learn how to think more critically about safety and improve your threat assessment capabilities. It will also help you develop one of the most essential yet most difficult-to-learn mental skills related to safety-mental flexibility.

You will probably notice that many of the concepts are repeated in other chapters. This was done for three reasons. 1) Repetition helps us retain what we have learned. 2) Many of the learning points apply to more than one chapter. This is not surprising because human beings, police officers included, tend to make common mistakes. For example, we all become complacent as we gain experience doing dangerous activities without suffering any negative consequences (e.g., less cautious when driving, less attentive when working in dangerous environments, etc.), and most of us tend to ignore our instincts when they warn of us danger (e.g., dismissing an uneasy feeling about someone or something as undue nervousness, etc.). Likewise, there is a great deal of commonality in the positive attributes of officers who, like the officers in this book, perform courageously under stress, and these bare repeating. Therefore, learning points related to complacency, trusting one's instincts, and maintaining a positive mindset are repeated to emphasize their frequency and importance in a crisis. 3) Like all violent encounters, no two incidents in this book are the same. Thus, no matter how frequently a particular learning point may be raised throughout the book, it fits into each case's context differently. For example, the ability to recognize and properly respond to danger signs was critical in almost every case, yet the details of how it came into play and was used by the officer were different in each incident. By seeing how this and other learning points apply to various circumstances, we enhance our all-important mental flexibility.

Finally, if you want to garner maximum value from this book, I would like to suggest that you read it one chapter at a time, with a day or more between each one. We learn and retain information better when we learn it in short chunks rather than in just a few long sessions. Also, this allows you to give deeper thought

to each chapter before moving on to the next, which aids in long-term learning and helps you learn how to apply what you learn to your particular circumstances.

Stay safe, be strong, and God bless you and yours.

CHAPTER 1

A Warrior's Sacrifice: The Keith Borders Case

“Greater love has no one than this:
to lay down one's life for one's friends.”

—John 15:13 (NIV)

INCIDENT DESCRIPTION

The gun felt ominously light in Keith Borders' hand as he wiped the blood from his eyes and headed to the back of his patrol car. He knew the Glock 21 well from long hours on the range and was thoroughly familiar with its feel as its hefty .45s emptied from its magazine.¹ It was nearly empty now, but the slide was still forward,² letting him know that it still held at least one round.

Don Mettinger, the gentle family man now turned beast, was getting to his feet again, still firing the deadly shotgun and seemingly oblivious to the blood flowing freely from a torso riddled with bullet holes. This was Borders' last

¹ Magazines, often incorrectly referred to as “clips,” are the objects that hold a firearm's ammunition. A small number of them are internal to the weapon, but most are detachable so they can be quickly replaced with another full one after they go empty. In pistols, they are long and rectangular in shape to fit into the weapon's handle, and generally hold 6-19 cartridges. In rifles, they are usually long and rectangular like pistol magazines, but are sometimes curved like a banana (frequently referred to as “banana clips”), and usually extend from the bottom of the gun, just in front of the trigger. Rifle magazines usually hold 10-30 cartridges, but some hold considerably more.

² The slide (i.e., upper portion of a semiautomatic handgun) slides back after each round is fired, and then forward to its original position again to ready the weapon for its next shot. This occurs with each shot until the final round is fired, at which time the slide stays to the rear, thereby indicating the gun is empty. Thus, the fact that the slide on Officer Borders' gun was still forward indicated that the gun still held at least one more round.

magazine, and he would have to make this shot count. He took a deep breath and released it slowly as he stopped next to his cruiser's right rear fender. Raising the Glock into firing position, he inhaled deeply again, let its sights settle squarely between Mettinger's eyes, and pressed the trigger.

The bloody ordeal had started about a half-hour before with a call that Borders, a 34-year-old, three-year veteran of the large metropolitan police department, would never have handled alone under normal circumstances. It was a domestic disturbance that had been holding for over 15 minutes, and he had tried to wait for another car to break free before taking it, but most of the department was tied up working a major biker run several miles away, leaving the rest of the city shorthanded. When more calls started coming in from neighbors, Borders grew increasingly concerned that someone would get hurt. Unable to ignore the possible danger to one of his citizens, he reluctantly took the call alone.

As Borders approached the residence, a luxurious two-story, he spotted two women, a large middle-aged man, and a little girl in the garage. He remembered the man, a salesman named Don Mettinger, from an auto accident he had worked in front of the same house two weeks earlier. In that case, Mettinger had come outside to help and then struck up a conversation with Borders, leaving him with the impression that he was an obliging, good-natured man.

But now, Mettinger was in a heated argument with the two women that grew hotter as Borders came up the driveway. Before Borders could reach them, Mettinger shoved the older of the two women, causing her to stumble violently backward. Borders stepped between them, facing Mettinger

"You need to calm down and talk to me," he said.

Mettinger's eyes bore fiercely into Borders'. "You're not gonna arrest me!" he growled.

"I'm not here to arrest you," Borders answered. "We just need to talk."

"I'm not goin' to jail!"

Then, before Borders could do anything to stop him, Mettinger turned, ran into the house, and slammed the door. Borders was close behind, but the deadbolt engaged before he could reach the door.

He turned to the older woman and asked, "Is that your husband?"

"Yes," she answered, "I'm Debbie Mettinger, and this is our daughter Jenny and our granddaughter."

"What's going on?" Borders asked.

"I don't know. He just lost it today. I don't know what's gotten into him."

Borders hadn't liked what he saw in Mettinger's eyes. "Are there any guns in the house?" he asked.

Debbie gasped out a sob. "I'm afraid so. Lots of 'em. He collects guns."

"We gotta leave," Borders commanded, "Let's go!"

Without argument, Jennifer grabbed her daughter and headed down the driveway, followed by her mother with Borders bringing up the rear. Borders herded everyone across the street to the relative safety of his cruiser, ordered them to the opposite side of the car, and called in a barricaded subject.

"It isn't safe here," he told them. "You're gonna have to leave while I stay here and try to calm him down."

Both women refused, but Jennifer capitulated once she realized her daughter might be in danger. There was a pickup in the garage and a Honda in the driveway, but it was too dangerous to allow anyone to get that close to the house. Borders told her to leave on foot, find the nearest officer, and ask him for help.

After Jennifer and her daughter left, Borders turned to Debbie again and urged her to follow, but she was determined to stay. As he continued to plead with her, he was interrupted by a barely audible sound from the right side of the house—a door closing. He looked in that direction and noticed movement just above the top edge of a six-foot stucco fence that surrounded the yard to the right of the garage. Shining his flashlight in that direction, he spotted Mettinger peering at them over the fence.

"Come out here so we can talk," Borders commanded.

Mettinger refused, and Borders repeated the order twice more with the same results. Then on Borders' next attempt, Mettinger answered with an ominous demand. "No!" he yelled, "You come to me, and I'll give you my gun."

Borders drew his Glock, squatted down for cover, and shined the flashlight directly into the man's eyes. "Put the gun down and come out through the garage with your hands where I can see 'em!" he commanded.

"Get that f_kin' light outa my eyes!" Mettinger screamed.

Borders repeated the order, got the same response, and repeated it again. This time Mettinger answered with a gunshot. Though just a wild shot fired in Borders' direction from a revolver poked over the top of the fence, Mettinger had just upped the ante. Borders grabbed his shotgun.

Meanwhile, Mrs. Mettinger began crying uncontrollably as her husband ran back inside through the side door and then closed the garage door with its remote control. Again, Borders urged her to leave, but she refused. Even worse,

she repeatedly tried to stand up. Borders already had his hands full trying to watch for Mettinger while coordinating the responding units on the radio. The added burden of trying to keep Debbie down made the shotgun dangerous to handle. He threw the cumbersome weapon back into his car and drew his Glock again.

Moments later, the situation worsened once more. As the first assist officer approached the residence, gunfire erupted from an upstairs window, peppering the patrol car with lead. Braking hard, the officer slammed the transmission into reverse and accelerated backward to safety. Borders knew he couldn't leave, and it was too late now to safely remove Debbie from the scene, but there was no sense in putting anyone else in danger. He keyed his mic and requested that all his assist units stay back.

An eerie lull followed, and Borders, now hunkered down next to his car, used the pause to try to calm Debbie down. Suddenly, the lull was shattered by two booming gunshots from inside the garage, punctuated by the appearance of two bulges in the overhead door, both of them peppered with jagged points of light from the garage's well-lit interior. The door began to rise, and Borders watched as Mettinger's bare legs came into view near the back of the garage. Mettinger's baggy shorts appeared next, topped by the man's hefty belly. Stuffed into his waistband were a .357 magnum revolver and a 9mm pistol, but even more worrisome was the 12-gauge pump shotgun he was holding.

Borders crouched low next to his right front fender, kept his gun trained on Mettinger, and ordered him to put the gun down. Instead, Mettinger took cover along the left side of the pickup truck parked in the garage and then moved outside to the Honda in the driveway and advanced toward the street. He stayed low and kept the vehicles between him and Borders as he moved, leaving the officer with little at which to shoot from his present position. Borders started moving toward the rear of his car for a better shot, but Debbie was also there, sobbing as she begged her husband to stop.

Borders knew he was just seconds away from a gunfight, and he didn't want Debbie caught in the middle. Grasping at one last chance to avoid gunfire, he calmly said to the gunman, "Look, Don, put the gun down and come here so we can talk."

"It's gone way past that," Mettinger answered as he swung the shotgun up toward his wife.

Horrified, Borders snapped off two quick shots at Mettinger and ran toward the man's wife. To let this innocent woman die was unthinkable. Driven

by the selflessness that burns deep in the heart of every warrior, he threw his body across the imperiled woman just as Mettinger's shotgun roared.

Border's body was twisting with his feet still in the air when the blast hit him in the forehead like a baseball bat, snapping him backward onto the ground. Bursting lights inside his head accentuated the gruesome sensation that his forehead had just been blown away. He forced himself up onto all fours and grabbed his forehead, fully expecting to touch his exposed brain. It was a bloody mess, but there was no gaping hole. He looked at Debbie, noting that she appeared unharmed. "Is my head all there?" he asked.

She nodded. "I think you're OK."

Borders was alert, breathing without difficulty, and able to feel his extremities. He knew he could still fight but assumed some of the pellets had penetrated his skull, inflicting a mortal wound. There was only one thing to do—stop Mettinger before he killed his wife. Only then would his death mean something.

Borders looked across the street. Mettinger was still standing there, apparently stunned into inaction by Borders' apparent resurrection from the dead. As Borders rose, gun in hand, Mettinger backed away and retreated up the driveway, firing as he went. Borders opened fire almost the same instant and, using the patrol car for cover, kept up a steady fire as Mettinger moved back inside the garage (Figure 1).

Meanwhile, Debbie, now shocked out of her stubbornness by the violence around her, crawled to a spot near the patrol car's right rear fender and stayed there. Now free from worry about the woman's wellbeing, Borders was able to focus entirely on stopping his adversary.

Mettinger was making himself a hard target by moving and keeping up a heavy fire with both handguns as well as the shotgun, but Borders was returning fire with equal vigor. As the fight went on, Borders soon realized there was something in the left rear corner of the garage that Mettinger wanted badly. Time and again, the man headed in that direction, only to be met by a hail of lead from Borders' .45. It worked—Mettinger was driven back on each attempt—but at a heavy cost in Border's supply of ammo. Borders emptied his first magazine, reloaded, kept firing, and had to reload again.

Borders could tell he was getting hits because Mettinger's bare torso was growing slick with blood, but the man seemed not to notice. It was disconcerting to see the powerful .45 having so little effect on his opponent, and Borders also had his own wound with which to contend. The blood flowing into his eyes

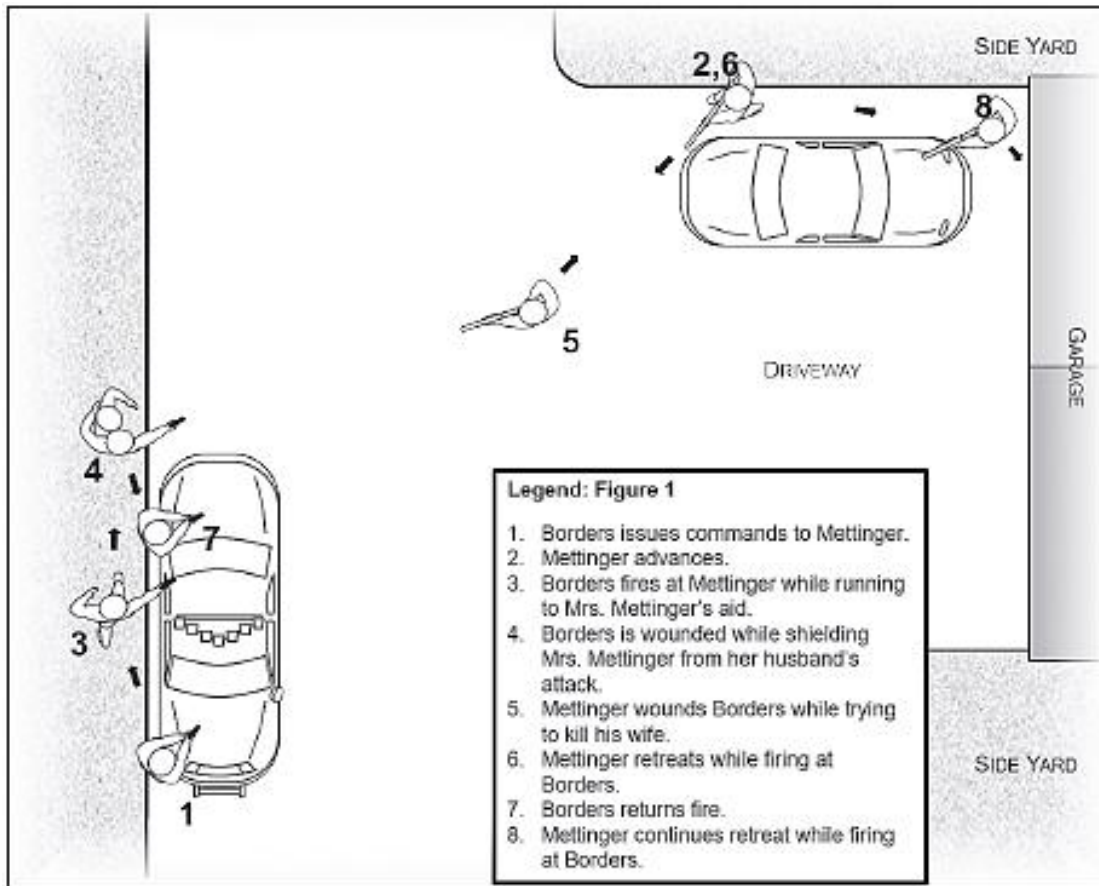


FIGURE 1: Mettinger advances, wounds Borders while attempting to kill Mrs. Mettinger, and then retreats.

blurred his vision, forcing him to stop repeatedly to wipe it away so he could see to shoot.

The wound also served as a reminder that he was probably dying. But as a man of faith, Borders wasn't especially bothered by the idea. Instead, it only drove him to fight that much harder. If he were going to die, he would save Mrs. Mettinger first.

Dissuaded from entering the garage by Borders' gunfire, Mettinger made his way along the left side of the Honda to its left rear fender, where he knelt and opened fire with the 9mm while reloading the shotgun again. Borders returned fire and saw the man drop down out of view. Lowering his eyes to the pavement below, he immediately spotted Mettinger lying down, partly concealed behind the car's rear wheels and firing the shotgun from under the car.

Borders had been taught to skip shots off the pavement in situations like this one, and he had practiced the technique often enough to be confident with it. Mettinger's side was partially exposed, so Borders aimed at a spot on the

driveway a few feet in front of it and squeezed off three rounds. All three found their mark, causing blood to spread over Mettinger's side.

Nevertheless, Mettinger was on the move again. Unsteadily, he rose to his feet, raised the shotgun, and opened fire. The Honda provided Mettinger with good cover, and Borders wanted to make sure he could get a clear shot at him. Staying low, he headed back to the rear of the squad car for a better angle, wiping the blood from his eyes again as he moved. The Glock had grown light in his hand, and he had already emptied his first two magazines. Now brutally aware that he was almost out of ammunition, he started deep breathing³ in preparation for what could well be his last shot.

He stopped next to his cruiser's back fender, squatted there briefly as he took another deep breath, and then brought the gun up to fire. His vision narrowed until he could see nothing but Mettinger's anger-laden face and his sights resting on the bridge of his nose. He fired, striking Mettinger in the left eye, instantly dropping him to the ground (Figure 2).

Borders had been right. The Glock's slide was still forward, but its chamber had closed over his last round. Realizing that Mrs. Mettinger would remain at risk as long as her husband was still capable of fighting, Borders wiped the blood from his eyes, stepped around the back of the squad car, and moved cautiously forward to check on his downed adversary. He had barely covered half the distance when he was met by several officers coming to his aid. While two of them confirmed that Mettinger was dead, another went to check on the man's wife. Though hysterical with fear and grief, she was otherwise unscathed by her husband's savage attack.

Borders was escorted to a waiting ambulance and conveyed to the hospital, where it was determined that he had been hit not with buckshot but with #4 shot⁴ instead and that only four pellets had struck him. After x-raying his skull and with little more than a cursory checkup, the emergency room physicians bandaged the pellet holes and sent Borders home.

3. Deep breathing is a method of breathing that calms the nerves and improves performance under stress. It requires four steps: 1) Breathe in through your nose to a slow count of four, 2) hold your breath to a slow count of four, 3) breathe out through your mouth to a slow count of four, and 4) hold your breath to a slow count of four. Ideally, the process should be repeated 3-5 times, but even one or two times can help a great deal.

4. Shotgun shells are filled with various sized pellets depending upon the kind and size of the game being hunted. *Buckshot* pellets are meant for large game, and are much larger and heavier than *shot* pellets. As a result, they inflict far more destructive injuries. Fortunately, Officer Borders was struck by the much smaller and lighter *shot* pellets, which is probably the reason why he survived.

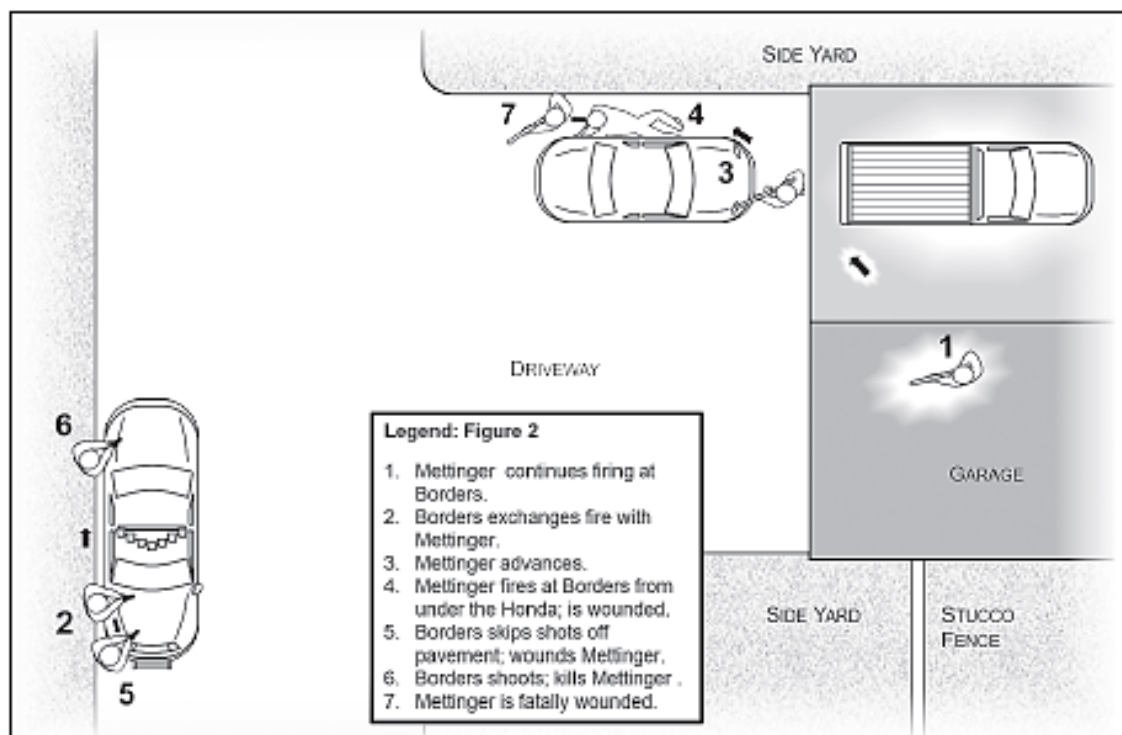


FIGURE 2: As the gunfight continues, Officer Borders fatally wounds Mettinger with a gunshot to the head.

THE AFTERMATH

Besides the bullet to his brain, Mettinger had taken six hits in the torso, one in the thigh, and two in the right ankle, all of which were with hard-hitting .45-caliber ammunition. Sadly, he had also been a law-abiding family man until earlier that evening but had inexplicably become enraged with his wife and daughter not long before the call came in. He had been drinking heavily that night, but a definitive explanation for his bizarre behavior has never been determined.

Subsequent investigation revealed why Mettinger had been so intent on reaching the back of the garage. A full box of 12-gauge 00 buckshot⁵ was found on a shelf there.

Mrs. Mettinger, though grieving over the tragedy, recognized the necessity for Officer Borders' courageous actions in her defense. She never blamed him for what he had to do.

5. 12-gauge 00 buckshot is among the deadliest loads that can be fired from any shotgun, especially when discharged at closer ranges, like the distance between Mettinger and Officer Borders when the gunman tried to shoot his wife. If Mettinger had been able to load his shotgun with the ammunition stored in his garage, there can be little doubt that he would have killed Officer Borders, and most likely his wife as well.

To add to this tragedy, it was later discovered that two of the shotgun pellets had penetrated Borders' brain. Furthermore, he had suffered two fractured vertebrae in his neck and back and an additional brain injury from the whiplash effect of the blow to his head and subsequent impact with the ground. When combined with generally poor care from some of his doctors, these injuries caused Borders' condition to worsen with time. Despite a valiant effort to remain on the job, he eventually learned that his condition was irreversible. And although it wasn't evident to those who worked with him, he realized his decision-making and response time were not what they used to be. Now mindful that his condition could put others at risk, he decided to retire on a medical pension. Since he is unable to work without losing his pension benefits, he remains unemployed.

Nevertheless, Borders has never regretted what happened that night. Despite the cost, he still firmly believes it was worth it to rescue Mrs. Mettinger from her husband's homicidal fury.

ANALYSIS

Situational Awareness

Keith Borders was a sharp, safety-conscious officer who made a point of always being ready for the possibility of violence. Because of this, he immediately focused on Mettinger's unusually intense reaction to his intervention in the dispute. But more importantly, he didn't hesitate to act on his observations. Rather than ignore the danger signs or delay acting on them, he trusted his instincts and wasted no time in getting the two women and child out of the garage. His decision to trust his instincts likely saved the lives of Mrs. Mettinger, perhaps her daughter and grandchild, and even Officer Borders himself. And if Mrs. Mettinger had left the area with her daughter and grandchild as he advised her to do, Borders could have retreated to a safer location and kept the house under observation until help arrived. With his wife out of the picture, time to cool down, a greater police presence, and a negotiator's help, it is possible that Mettinger could have been talked into surrendering without violence.

There are two critical lessons to learn here. First, it demonstrates why police officers are trained and expected to be situationally aware at all times and to act on their suspicions. Some police critics hypothesize that this makes officers paranoid and even trigger happy, but nothing is further from the truth. In fact, the practice of continuous situational awareness makes officers better

at accurately assessing danger and more confident in their ability to protect themselves and others, which in turn reduces stress, enhances clear thinking, and improves decision making. And in some cases, it can allow them to take defensive action before the confrontation escalates to into lethal violence, or, as in this case, even enable them to retreat to a safer location, where they can have a better chance of stabilizing the situation

The other critical lesson is a simple one. Since no one can ever know where or when danger will materialize, we should make a habit of practicing situational awareness at all times. This is not to say we should be overly cautious to the point of becoming paranoid, but we should always have our eyes and other senses open to the things going on around us.

Equally crucial, we need to learn to trust our instincts and be willing to act on them as Officer Borders did. Our danger instincts are not a mysterious sixth sense that we can afford to ignore. Instead, they are hardwired into our DNA to help keep us safe, and they work like this: Even though we are not consciously aware of it, our subconscious mind is continually taking in incredible amounts of data from our environment and quickly assessing it for what it means to us, especially concerning our safety. When it sees, hears, feels, or even smells or tastes something that it deems to be potentially dangerous, it sends an immediate warning signal to our conscious brain that something is wrong. This all happens at the subconscious level, and since the subconscious mind assesses data far faster than our conscious mind, it happens almost instantly. Unlike our conscious brain, it doesn't communicate with words but solely with emotions, like uneasiness or fear. We may feel uneasy when the presence of danger is not particularly clear, but that doesn't mean we should ignore it. We still need to do something to make things safer for us. Often this is nothing more than paying more attention and looking for more danger signs, slowing down, speeding up, backing away, or even giving a suspicious person a look that tells him you know what's going on and are ready to defend yourself.

When the danger is more apparent, the subconscious brain will signal danger with a feeling of fear or even alarm. This, too, requires immediate action. Sometimes this can be a low-profile response like those mentioned above. Still, at other times it must be something more obvious, like running away, taking cover, taking a fighting stance, or when appropriate, drawing a weapon. The key point here is to listen to and trust our instincts and act on them when they warn us of danger.

Reluctance to Shoot

From a purely tactical perspective, Officer Borders could probably have prevented Mettinger's attack if he had shot him sooner, either immediately after the garage door opened or when Mettinger left the cover of the Honda to approach the street. He had more than an adequate legal and moral justification for doing so because Mettinger—who had already fired at him once, shot up a patrol car, and fired through the garage door—was initiating a confrontation while armed with no less than three firearms. Moreover, he continued to advance while staying behind cover even after Borders ordered him to put the gun down, making it clear that he was determined to initiate an attack. Nevertheless, Officer Borders tried again to avoid bloodshed by calmly asking the man to put the gun down.

Contrary to the opinion of many police critics, most police officers are exceptionally reluctant to shoot, as evidenced by the countless body and dash cam videos that show them repeatedly ordering armed individuals to put their guns down, sometimes even after the offender has pointed a gun at them. This is far more dangerous than generally believed because an action is faster than a reaction, which means an armed offender can raise his gun and shoot before the officers can return fire. However, despite the danger and the fact that such warnings are generally not required by law,⁶ most officers will, like Officer Borders, go to extremes to avoid shooting another human being.

There are various reasons for this, not the least of which is the natural reluctance of ordinary human beings to kill one another. Even though police officers are trained and expected to shoot when necessary to defend themselves or others against lethal attacks, this instinctive reluctance to kill can cause them to hesitate. Also, officers are regularly reminded during their training and in the media that their legal, professional, financial, and even emotional well-being will probably be severely jeopardized after a shooting, making them even more hesitant. On the other hand, officers are sometimes legally and—more importantly—morally obliged to use deadly force. If they shoot too soon or without adequate cause, they violate their duty to protect their citizens' rights and may go to prison, and if they wait too long, it may cost them or innocent citizens their lives.

6. There are two exceptions to this. The most common is the US Supreme Court requirement that officers should give a verbal warning before shooting a fleeing felon, but this is only required when it is practical for them to do so (*Tennessee v. Garner*, 471 U.S. 1 [1985]). The other is the argument put forth in some appellate courts that officers should also give warnings in cases when the offender is directly threatening them, but this argument has generally been dismissed by the US Supreme Court.

Fortunately, considering the vast number of dangerous encounters officers face every day, they make remarkably few mistakes. This is exceptionally extraordinary when we consider the conditions under which most lethal encounters occur. The average police gunfight lasts approximately 3.5 seconds, from start to finish, which leaves the officer a dangerously short period to spot his assailant's threatening move, recognize it for what it is, decide how to defend himself, and, finally, execute his response. This doesn't take long because of how the human brain works, but even a few milliseconds can make the difference between life and death in a gunfight. There are remarkably few occupations that require such life-and-death decisions under such incredible stress. Emergency room doctors, EMTs, and other medical personnel must also work under stress, of course, but none of them must make such rapid decisions with their own lives hanging in the balance.

Moreover, unlike people in virtually every other profession, police officers rarely have the time to consult with peers, supervisors, or anyone else before making a crucial decision. They must act alone under extreme stress, under field conditions that often work against them, and with inadequate information or time to make a well-considered decision. It is indeed remarkable that officers don't make more crucial mistakes than they do.

Nevertheless, even one fatal mistake is one mistake too many. Unfortunately, since police officers are only human, some mistakes are bound to happen, especially considering their training. Contrary to what many believe, police training in this country is grossly inadequate for what is expected of our officers. We expect perfection from them when it comes to the use of force, particularly lethal force, and we expect such perfection to occur under the difficult conditions mentioned above. While it is currently impossible to train our officers well enough to meet these expectations every time flawlessly without fail, it is possible to come much closer than we do now. But it won't be easy, and it won't be cheap. Training officers to think and perform beyond reproach under the severe pressure and time constraints of real-life armed confrontations requires training under simulated conditions that come as close as possible to real life.

Moreover, many of these skills are highly perishable, which means this training must be repeated at frequent intervals. Since all this takes a lot of time—time that the officers could otherwise use to patrol and respond to calls for service—more officers will have to be hired to maintain current manpower levels, or officers will have to train on overtime. Also, this kind of training requires a much larger number of trainers per trainee than other kinds of training, and the cost of training equipment, ammunition, etc., is much higher as well.

We can have much better-trained officers who will do a better job of meeting the public's expectations, but the cost will be high.

*Why Officers Must Sometimes Shoot Offenders
Multiple Times*

Mettinger absorbed nine rounds from Borders' of .45—six of which hit him in the torso and two more of which severed his right foot—without any significant effect on his fighting ability. This would have been remarkable even if Officer Borders had been firing marginally effective rounds, but he was using .45 caliber Gold Dot ammunition, which is considered by many to be one of the most effective anti-personnel rounds on the market.

Unfortunately, such resistance to gunfire is not particularly unusual, as evidenced by several other shootings recounted in this book. The human body can stand up to an incredible amount of punishment, especially when fueled by alcohol, drugs, mental illness, anger, or other strong emotions. In this case, Mettinger's near-superhuman ability to take rounds appeared to have been bolstered by alcohol-induced rage, but sometimes the only identifiable explanation for such resistance to gunfire is sheer willpower. Regardless of why, it is alarming and distracting to face an armed assailant who seems impervious to gunfire.

There are two things we can learn from this. First, it explains why police officers sometimes shoot assailants a seemingly excessive number of times. Since reality makes it clear that some people are amazingly impervious to gunshot wounds for various reasons, officers are trained to keep shooting until their assailant is no longer a threat. Even a mortally wounded attacker can do a lot of damage in an incredibly short period, making it imperative to keep shooting if he doesn't collapse immediately.

There is another valid but little-known reason why officers sometime fire so many shots. Once we humans start a series of actions, like repeatedly pulling a trigger, it is virtually impossible to stop those actions instantly, especially under stress. This is because it takes time for us to shift gears mentally and then more time for our decision to reach the involved muscles and stop them from moving. Since combatants in a gunfight often remain mobile after being shot one or more times, officers often fire more than once, which puts their already highly stressed minds into a repetitive pattern that requires conscious effort to stop. Moreover, since our survival instinct drives us to work at maximum speed when in danger, and the average time it takes for a human to pull a trigger is three times per second, it is not unusual for officers to continue firing several more shots after they realize the offender is no longer a threat. It is hard not to

be shocked when we hear of such shootings. However, the harsh truth is that they are often physiologically unavoidable.

Our Own Resistance to Gunshot Wound and Other Severe Injuries

The other lesson we can learn from Mr. Mettinger's ability to withstand so much physical trauma is that we must never assume that we will die if shot or otherwise severely injured. Since far less than ten percent of all gunshot wounds inflict mortal injuries, and most of those kill instantly, the odds are excellent that you will survive if you are still alive after being hit. This is true even for head wounds, as evidenced by the fact that Officer Borders not only survived his but was able to win the gunfight despite it.⁷

Similarly, many other significant injuries can be equally survivable. Modern medicine has made great strides in treating traumatic injuries, and the human body can take far more punishment than most of us realize, especially when we possess a strong will to live. Regardless of how badly you may be hurt, focus on your bodies' ability to withstand tremendous damage, and keep going no matter what....

7. Granted, Mettinger was killed instantly by a head shot, but that was a bullet through an eye socket. For the most part, the hard, curved bones of the face and skull are more resistant to bullets than most of the other bones in the body, and the most vulnerable parts of the head are especially small targets.