Jones' AFTER the SMOKE CLEARS

Second Edition

Surviving the Police Shooting— An Analysis of the Post Officer-Involved Shooting Trauma

Adam Pasciak, Ph.D.

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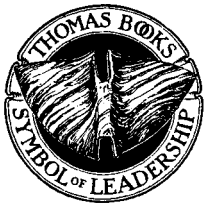
By

ADAM PASCIAK, PH.D.



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This book is dedicated to the men and women who protect our cities every day.

I never dreamed it would be me,
My name for all eternity,
Recorded here at this hallowed place,
Alas, my name, no more my face.
"In the line of duty," I hear them say.
My family now the price to pay.
My folded flag stained with their tears,
We only had those few short years.
The badge no longer on my chest,
I sleep now in eternal rest.
My sword I pass to those behind,
And pray they keep this thought in mind.
I never dreamed it would be me.
And with a heavy heart and bended knee,
I ask for all here from the past, Dear God, let my name be the last.

–Anonymous (on memorial outside Dearborn Heights Police Department)

FOREWORD

I met Officer Adam Pasciak in 1998 following a fatal on-duty shooting associated with a routine traffic stop. Adam was seriously injured during the incident but maintained his desire to work as a police officer. He became interested in police psychology and traumatic debriefings during his own debriefing program. He pursued his doctoral degree and Doctor Pasciak is presently a psychologist working with police officers and public safety personnel. He also has continued to focus and work with individuals in post-traumatic debriefing sessions.

After the Smoke Clears (2nd ed.) represents a series of observations, suggestions, recommendations, and best practices following critical incidents. Specific officer perceptions, anxieties, and thoughts are relatively predictable before, during, and after traumatic incidents. Doctor Pasciak presents a detailed and involved set of concerns that might be considered by the individual, the individual's family, and the departmental administration.

It has been noted that many significant clinical perceptions of a traumatic event are the perceptions of the participants of the event. The meaningful reality of the event is truly the perceptions of the individuals as opposed to the objective facts of the event. Helping officers, families, and police departments understand the phases, perceptions, and cognitions of the involved individuals can significantly improve coping skills following a traumatic incident.

Reports from senior police officers have suggested that, in the past, officers were not encouraged to talk about their emotional reactions experienced during and following a shooting incident. Frequently, a command officer would simply ask if the officer was okay. The response was typically in the affirmative, since most officers were concerned that discussions about anxieties and worries would be perceived as signs of weakness. Additionally, command staff felt uneasy asking questions of the officer for two basic reasons. Command did not feel comfortable examining an officer's emotional status and command was not certain which questions to ask.

After the Smoke Clears (2nd ed.) is an outstanding tool for promoting better command understanding and performance following a traumatic incident. Doctor Pasciak has skillfully organized insights and details that can be utilized to develop departmental support patterns. This book is very well written and informative and can become an invaluable tool when confronted with a shooting incident.

Frequently, following a traumatic or critical incident, there is a loss of memory that may or may not be recovered. During Officer Pasciak's debriefing, the loss of "eight seconds" was noted and discussed. It is very impressive and insightful that Doctor Pasciak has written a book that will help other officers understand the impact and aftermath of traumatic shootings. The loss of his "eight seconds" likely served as a motivator for him to present this new edition of *After the Smoke Clears* in order to find those answers. Despite not getting those answers, I suspect the efforts were worth it.

RONALD S. JONES, PH.D.
Licensed Psychologist, 2014

PREFACE

While there is research and information regarding police shootings, most of it has been published in professional psychological journals rather than materials intended for everyday officers. As professional researchers have their own occupational language, which differs greatly from the language of the cop on the beat, the people who needed this information weren't getting it. This failure to coordinate results with those who might get the best use of it was unintentional, but the fact that the information was not getting out to the very population it was intended to help was indeed unfortunate. The goal of this book is to translate between these two languages to allow officers to know of the valuable work that had been done by excellent researchers.

Many years ago I wrote a report on a death investigation that I felt was very thorough and complete only to have my commanding officer tell me that while it was indeed very thorough, it was the driest, most boring thing he had ever read. I hope I have learned enough in the years since so that this current project is not only informative, but interesting as well. This book is written with the street officer always in mind–trying to combine the practical elements of the world of law enforcement along with the psychological dynamics behind them (the best of both worlds if you will). While it is my fantasy that this book becomes a runaway best seller, in reality, if even one officer is able to benefit from this information, the project was worth all of the effort.

In the original text, Corporal Clarence Jones' work centered on something he called POST, or police officer shooting syndrome. The topic, which appeared to be the focus of his master's degree research, encompassed much of the original work. Having reread it a few times, I have decided to try to keep it mostly intact, while adding some current research to enhance some of those sections.

While he does provide a great example of describing some general post-shooting experiences, I thought it would be helpful to have a real account of my own experience, including some interpretations of my behaviors and those of my department. Interestingly, I wrote this section first–before updat-

ing Jones' original–and was surprised to see how similar my own experiences were to those described by Jones. There are differences, to be sure, some largely due to the lapse in time from the actual shooting to ultimately the day I returned to work. Despite those differences, it helps to keep in mind that just as the concepts learned in the academy look different when encountered in situations on the street, psychological elements and disorders can look very different from their clinical descriptions in books. In other words, real experiences during shootings will differ somewhat from more general ones, but it helps to have a guideline of what one can expect.

Finally, the last section of this revised book looks for reasons why these things happen and how to deal with them more effectively. Many of my former coworkers and current patients will attest to the fact that one thing I focus on is the "why" of things. If we know the why we are in better shape to respond in a healthy way. Knowing that why is key to understanding not only our responses but those of the people around us as well. This knowledge allows us to move from irrational responses based on perceptions that we are being intentionally mistreated, which leads to turmoil in our lives, to understanding responses on a rational level where we understand behaviors as typical human responses which leads to improved coping. Not to suggest that rational thinking will always lead to positive feelings: in fact, we may still be unhappy with how events play out and how people behave, but if we can take it less personally, then we will be able to cope that much better. Maybe we will even be in a better position to ask for the things we need or be more supportive to fellow officers who are in need of our help.

Most of the cops I have known have been interested in learning ways to stay ahead of the threats we face on the streets each day. I think there are things in this book that will allow many of you to do just that. I hope you enjoy the book. Be safe.

A.P.

INTRODUCTION

I got the idea to write a version of this book several years ago while I was doing research for the paper that would ultimately lead to my doctorate degree in psychology. At that time, I think I was still trying to grasp the dynamics of my own shooting and understand what was happening to me in the time following that event. Unfortunately, because of the personal and disturbing nature of the material, I struggled to stay focused on it and the idea for the book never really took form. When the publisher approached me to revise this particular book–originally written by Corporal Clarence E. Jones Jr. of the Amarillo Police Department and published in 1989–I saw it as an opportunity to finally get a handle on how I wanted to present this information.

Naturally, this raises a few important questions, namely: Who is this book for? And, how is this book different from other books on police shootings? In response to the first question, this is not for officers looking for a book on tactical approaches or technical aspects of shooting scenarios–I suppose unless you are looking for information on what NOT to do. For those individuals, I offer briefly the following advice: do not (a) run directly behind a suspect who is holding a gun in his hand, or (b) stay in that position as he turns and points the gun in your direction. For those officers, you're welcome, I hope you found this to be helpful.

For the officers who are instead looking to find out what happens in those seconds where your gun clears your holster and you do what many of us are told we may never have to do during our careers: take aim at a living person and pull the trigger, this book is designed for you. It is also for those who want to know what to expect in the moments, days, and so on after the shooting is over, and just as importantly, why it is happening.

The message officers get from instructors at the academy and their local shooting range is, if we train well enough, our brains will go on autopilot in a live scenario and we will do what we need to do to survive a shooting. There is definitely truth to this concept–if we put the time in the training,

muscle memory will kick in and we should be physically ready to encounter threats when they arise. I know this to be true from firsthand experience. But what comes next? What about when the smoke clears and the threat is neutralized? How do we handle what comes after this?

There is scant information on what comes next. Consider that this particular book specifically on the topic of surviving a gunfight is only now, 25 years later, being revised. Lt. Col. Dave Grossman wrote a helpful book, *On Killing,* and he does a nice job of discussing some of the dynamics and dilemmas of shootings and killing someone. His focus is on soldiers, spanning centuries of war and fighting. While there are obvious differences between soldiers and police officers, I think there are many similarities to our experiences. For most of us, we learned while growing up that killing another human being was wrong/evil/sinful, and despite that in particular situations (i.e., war, a police situation) the killing may be necessary and justified, it can be difficult to go against those earlier messages. How do we reconcile those concepts? My intention with this book is to combine elements from Corporal Jones' original manuscript along with my own shooting experience and research, and out of that hopefully provide useful information for officers on how to deal with traumatic events.

This book is different from other police books in that it will hopefully bring a better understanding on why we experience things the way we do so that you might better understand your own thoughts and feelings following a traumatic event–and maybe even understand the reactions of your peers a little better. Based on my own experiences and the conversations I had with fellow officers as I conducted my research, I think there are a lot of officers out there looking for answers to these kinds of questions. For some, maybe there has not been a shooting incident in your agency to learn from, and for others, it is more that the officers at their respective departments do not talk about what they felt during their shooting. This leaves the individual officer with no idea on what to expect regarding his or her thoughts and physical sensations–on what might be normal or a sign that something is not right.

I have heard it said that officers are not big on talking to psychologists and I have witnessed the resistance and apparent indifference during my attempts to gather information for my earlier research. Surprisingly, the various administrations–usually the enemy, right?–were very supportive. It was not until I needed the cooperation of the individual officers where I was met with indifference and possibly suspicion (in truth, there was a time when I would have reacted much the same). The officers who have shared their experiences with me, however, often discussed feeling isolated following their shooting, leaving them to come up with less healthy ways of dealing with their conflicted feelings.

Not surprisingly, suppressing the feelings or going to the bar (aka: choir practice), as might have been suggested to us by well-intentioned peers, are not real solutions. In fact, this approach may actually make things worse, especially if this is the primary coping style. While alcohol, a depressant, might help in loosening the tongue so that we can talk with our peers over a couple of drinks, it becomes a barrier to healing when it is used to avoid dealing with troublesome material. My hope here is that some useful solutions are learned and the officers who read this book make better choices than I did.

Knowing that I am not alone in how I struggled to work through the many issues after my shooting is of small consolation. Sadly, some have struggled worse. It is not always the bullets from the bad guy's gun that prove to be fatal for some of our brothers and sisters of the badge. The struggles afterward for understanding and control can be profound. When the officer–who is used to being called upon to take control of situations–finds that he/she does not have the answers and cannot reconcile his/her actions with his/her beliefs, desperate, and final, solutions such as suicide are sometimes sought (Violanti, 1995).

When the officer becomes the focus of an investigation following what seemed to be a completely justified shooting, reality itself gets turned upside-down and very little makes sense. On top of this, the connection the officer likely had with his/her peers prior to the shooting often changes. Peers may avoid the officer, possibly not knowing what to say or thinking the officer needs to be left alone, or sometimes well-intended peers make offending statements to the officer regarding the officer's decision making. This change in peer response coincides with the confused emotions the officer experiences following the shooting and exacerbates the feelings of isolation. With this in mind, it is little wonder why the struggle to deal with the events after a shooting is so profound for many officers.

It was not until 1979 that any type of program directed at post-shooting trauma was developed and implemented. Of those, one must ask how many were effective or fully endorsed by department administrators or fellow officers. Without the overt support of the administration and peers, many officers suffered needlessly not knowing there were options to help them get through their experiences, or not trusting the ones offered. With the exception of a few magazine articles, very little of the research seemed to be making its way to the various police agencies. In modern day 2014, it still does not appear this is a topic that is embraced by many departments.

This particular book may not have been written except for the experiences of Corporal Jones following a shooting back in 1989. His hope was to share what he experienced while on the job and later learned during his studies. As was the intention of Corporal Jones then, my own hope now is that

officers reading this are not only better prepared to respond to the challenges of their own traumatic experiences, but are also able to recognize and help fellow officers.

Throughout this book, the titles "officer" or "police" are used to designate law enforcement personnel. This is not intended to imply a disregard for other agency titles. It is done merely for ease of writing. Please feel free to substitute your own law enforcement title to fit where appropriate. Trauma does not recognize differences in duties for the city police officer, county deputy, or federal agent. Law enforcement agents from each of these agencies share the burden of the trauma. This book contains a general description of trauma from Corporal Jones as well as a more specific account from my own experience. It is safe to say, just as it is presented in this book, each of our experiences will look a little different; however, at its core, the response to trauma is similar for all of us.

One other point: the question has been raised in some circles that officers sometimes develop symptoms as a result of education surrounding the trauma. Research does not support the contention that knowledge causes trauma. Knowledge is often the key to successful coping.

On behalf of myself and Corporal Jones, I hope you find something useful with the information that follows.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

This book could not have been written without the help of several people. To begin with, I want to say thank you to my parents for their unwavering support over the years. To my wife, Crystal, for her encouragement to pursue my dreams; to my four boys, Aric, Aron, Blake, and Logan, for whom I try to set a good example. To Doctor Ron Jones, who helped set me on a course to get ready for life outside of law enforcement and continues to be a mentor, and many other countless people who responded to my questions and pleas for guidance when I have gotten stuck. I have learned that life gets a lot easier when I accept the help my friends have offered. I thank you all for being there for me.

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Part One

SURVIVING THE POLICE SHOOTING

I. HISTORY AND INTRODUCTION TO TRAUMA

Ask someone who is not a police officer or otherwise involved in the criminal justice profession this question: What is a police officer? The answers may vary somewhat, but descriptions will likely tend toward a few stereotypical cop personas that are the staples for television, novels, and movies. You will hear about the officer who engages in multiple shootouts during his shift, one who is able to maintain a calm demeanor while careening off multitudes of cars and doing extensive property damage while engaged in a high-speed pursuit of some serious felons–paying no mind to the potentially injured (or worse) citizen bystanders, or one who is wholly unaffected by the carnage of a brutal homicide–typically shown casually eating a chili-dog while looking over the blood spattered crime scene. In each of these cases, the officers will be maintaining a sarcastic devil-may-care attitude and often back-talking their superior officer.

Maybe they will even have an idea of what a cop is based on what they experienced when they were pulled over for speeding by the unsmiling, stern looking officer who stood next to their door, hand resting on the butt of his/her firearm, lecturing them on their driving; or when that same looking officer broke up their party because the music was a little loud; made under aged individuals pour out their alcohol or smash their cigarettes; or my own father's memory of the neighborhood cop who kicked him square in the backside of his pants to chase him away from the alleyway dice game that was common in the neighborhood during the 1940s. Noncops might wonder what the big deal was about going a few miles over the speed limit, having a little get-together with friends and enjoying some music, kids wanting to taste a drink or smoke a cigarette like mom and dad, or even what the fuss was about a little boy who just wanted to be like the bigger boys in his neighborhood, hustling instead of working–not realizing what might happen if these things were left unchecked. These skewed images of what cops are all about make it difficult for noncops to truly understand what it means to wear the badge.