

WHY COPS DIE

(AND HOW TO PREVENT IT)



Gerald W. Garner

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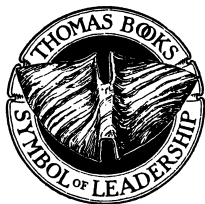
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By

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*To the front-line law enforcement officers of today
Who will be the law enforcement leaders of tomorrow.*

PREFACE

Everyone makes mistakes. Law enforcement officers do, too. But because of the nature of their business, when cops make mistakes they can die violently. Even when officers make errors and no bad consequences ensue, they may be setting themselves up for future disaster because mistakes repeated can become a habit—an unsafe habit that can have tragic results later. Mistakes have multiple ways of killing the unwary.

This book identifies those fatal errors and furnishes to-the-point advice for avoiding them. It is intended to do nothing short of saving cops' lives. It is aimed across the spectrum of the law enforcement organization from the slick-sleeved rookie to the incredibly important first-line supervisor to the command staff. Chiefs and sheriffs will find it of value, as will those directly responsible for the training of law enforcement officers. It relies on law enforcement's bloody history to reveal what has gone wrong for a very long time—and how to fix it so that no more cops die needlessly.

Officer survival is not rocket science. Much of it relies on good decision-making driven by plain common sense. Oftentimes survival means slowing things down and planning before acting. It may require de-escalating a volatile individual. This book examines how to do that. It offers the same, common sense advice that solid patrol sergeants have been sharing with their briefing room charges for a long while. It is not accidental that it has been assembled by a police chief who spent 15 years as a sergeant: the best job a cop can ever hope to have.

WHY COPS DIE can be used in a lot of ways, all of them useful for drastically reducing the number of officers who die on the job every year. It should be issued to every law enforcement academy recruit. It belongs in the equipment bag of every-street savvy cop who wants to brush up on technique from time to time. The Big Boss should keep it handy to stay in touch with the real world of the streets. And it should be especially valuable to the first-line leader who uses it for roll call training, perhaps by assigning individual chapters for discussion by each one of his troops.

This book provides time- and experience-proven advice for responding safely and effectively to threats to a law enforcement officer's safety. These

tactics and techniques work. However, the reader should realize that there cannot be an absolute guarantee of a successful outcome. Alternative tactics and techniques may, under certain circumstances, work well, too. The officer involved must remain the ultimate decision-maker in applying the guidance provided here in a manner best-suited to the situation he is facing.

Too many law enforcement officers already have made the supreme sacrifice while protecting the innocent from the evil. By applying practical, potentially lifesaving advice to their daily duties law enforcement's first-line practitioners can sharply reduce the number of peacekeepers who die or are maimed in the future. That effort begins here.

G.W.G.

INTRODUCTION

As every cop knows, law enforcement can be a dangerous business. He or she learns that in the academy and continues to hear it throughout a career. He or she also knows that many of the bad things that can happen to cops occur because of a mistake—perhaps just a temporary lapse—on the part of a good officer.

Everyone makes mistakes. But when a cop makes a mistake of the officer safety variety it literally can cost that officer his or her life. That is the reality of the streets.

The fatal mistakes really have changed little over the years. Many of the same errors that felled law enforcement officers a hundred years ago are still killing them today. Failing to handcuff or search properly. Relaxing too soon. Missing or ignoring the danger signs. Rushing when speed is not required. Making dangerous assumptions. Not getting needed help. Foolhardy brava-do.

Indeed, knowledge of the “traditional” errors that cops make has been established for a long time. Today, however, officers are becoming aware of other threats—additional mistakes—than can have lethal consequences. Failing to formulate a plan of action. Aggravating a situation as opposed to de-escalating it. Driving too fast. Not knowing when to back off and redeploy. Failing to communicate effectively. Failing to critique their own performance in order to get better for the next time.

Those mistakes and more kill cops. This book identifies the cop killers. It explores how they happen and why. Most important of all, it goes into detail about how to prevent these terminal errors. After all, the primary reason for investigating WHY COPS DIE is to determine HOW TO PREVENT IT.

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WHY COPS DIE
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Chapter 1

Why Cops Die:

THEY BECOME COMPLACENT

Just before 4 p.m. a 46-year-old sergeant with a mid-sized municipal police department was shot and killed. The sergeant, who was a veteran of 24 years in law enforcement, had accompanied code enforcement officers to a residence where an individual had been collecting and processing scrap metal without a license. As the officers and a cleanup crew were wrapping up, a man who was not involved in the situation approached and fired a single 9mm semiautomatic pistol round at the sergeant. The officer was hit fatally in the back of the head. The 25-year-old killer then shot himself fatally. The offender, who was on parole at the time, was known to have mental disorders and a violent criminal history that included assault on police.

Law enforcement officers repeatedly answer calls that display no outward indication of danger. While dealing with one person, they may tune out other individuals who are nearby or passing through the area. On rare but sometimes fatal occasions, the apparently safe situation changes radically or the previously harmless passerby turns into an attacker. If an officer is not careful, if he dares to become complacent, if he makes the dangerous assumption that all is well, tragedy can be the result. It happens all too often.

Today's law enforcement officers have received extensive training in officer safety, beginning in the basic academy. Rare is the officer who has not been drilled in the fatal errors that have resulted in tragedy for unwary or careless officers of the last decade, the last year, yesterday. With few exceptions, they know the rules for staying alive. They know what to do. But sometimes when it's really cold, or hot, or it's raining, or they are in a hurry, or they are just plain tired, they fail to do things the way they know they should be done for safety when dealing with an individual or situation. They cut corners. They cheat. They become complacent. And because most people are

not out to hurt them, they get away with it without penalty. If they're not careful, their unsafe conduct becomes habit . . . a very bad habit. At the worst extreme, complacency can become a way of doing business. And that's very bad for any law enforcement officer's survival chances.

Sometimes experienced officers appear more likely to become complacent when it comes to their street survival practices than do their less-experienced peers. Perhaps it is that some of them lose a bit of their edge with their years on the job. Perhaps with a lot of time under their belt they make the dangerous assumption that nothing bad has happened so far so it probably won't now. Or they may have the fatalistic view that if something bad is destined to happen there is nothing they can do about it. If these officers then observe some of their colleagues engaging in the same sort of complacent behavior, it may serve to reinforce with them that there is really nothing wrong with conducting business that way. And that may set them on a path headed for a personal disaster. It is not a path you want to tread.

Retired Los Angeles Police Department Commander and officer safety author Pierce R. Brooks was one of the nation's first advocates of talking about what cops do wrong so that future officers will not perish from the same fatal mistakes that killed their peers. When decades ago he enumerated the cardinal errors that kill good cops he included complacency foremost among them. Beyond that, he noted that complacency was the umbrella under which many other officer safety sins gather. In other words, if a cop is complacent he is likely to commit other officer survival gaffes, too. Bloody experience would show that Brooks was right. Complacency kills good cops.

Sometimes it is hard to separate complacency from plain laziness. An officer has been trained and supervised in doing it the right way, the safe way. But because it is too much trouble, because it takes even a little more work, he chooses the quick and easy route. He *knows* that his prisoner must be searched multiple times. He *knows* that same prisoner must be belted in for transport and kept under close observation throughout the trip. But because it is too much trouble, he does none of these things. If he's lucky he gets away with his complacency. If he's really fortunate he may get away with it multiple times, but he only has to exhaust his good luck supply once. When that happens his complacency, his downright laziness, may cost him his life. It's not a risk you ever want to take.

HOW TO PREVENT IT

A survival attitude is the foundation for everything you do in your sometimes-dangerous job as a law enforcement officer. How you regard your job,

how you think about it has a lot to do with your chances of reaching the end of a long and rewarding career with all your parts and faculties intact. That means you can never leave room for complacency to thrust its ugly head into your routine, your way of doing all things job-related. Rigorously self-enforced good habits do not allow room for complacency or laziness to flourish. You know that. You follow those self-imposed safety guidelines to assure your continued survival.

You can bolster your ability to avoid complacency by watching what happens when law enforcement officers lapse into carelessness, locally or elsewhere in the profession. Unfortunately, there are plenty of tragic examples that illustrate the tragic things that can happen when cops become complacent. Too often, the death or serious injury of a colleague of yours can be the result. It is no less tragic if that colleague wears a different color uniform than yours and does his or her job on the other side of the country.

Granted, your employer and your agency's supervisors have their own responsibilities when it comes to rooting out complacency in the organization. Complacency must be detected and corrected before it results in tragedy. You share that responsibility if you are a field trainer or a senior officer. Complacency on the job by one of your colleagues can do more than get its practitioner killed or maimed. It can get *you* or others killed or hurt, too. By confronting complacency in other officers when you see it you can do more than help protect them, as important as that may be. You can protect yourself, too. Too often, complacency in a law enforcement officer harms those around him or her.

But you cannot help others if you do not first take care of yourself. It's why the flight attendant tells you to don your own emergency oxygen mask before you help someone else with theirs. You help fight complacency when you realize that you have *never* seen it all or done it all. You can always learn more. More about staying safe, for instance. Complacency is defeated when you acknowledge that you do not know everything there is to know.

You also combat complacency when you vow never to give in to cutting corners and being safety-sloppy on the job. You then keep that vow religiously. You recognize always that law enforcement is not a profession that you can follow half-heartedly. It is not a job you can do with half of your brain engaged. And it's not a job you can do safely with a complacent state of mind.

Neither is law enforcement the sort of endeavor you can do in safety with a fatalistic, defeatist attitude. As an intelligent human being you know that bad things are not preordained to happen. Sometimes they happen because someone got careless—or complacent. You are decided on determining your own destiny, not allowing fate (or complacency) to determine it for you. You

realize that bad things can happen to you. But you also realize that they are a lot more likely to happen if you are careless and complacent. You are not going to let that happen.

You know something else, too. You know that frequent self-examination combats complacency. When you look critically at what you have done before you make it more likely that you will do even better—translate that to mean more safely—in the future. Critiquing what you have done before makes it a lot harder for complacency to find a home at your address. Complacency cannot exist where honest self-examination resides.

You are too smart to tolerate the presence of complacency in your routine. You are too intent on staying safe to tolerate complacency in yourself or in those you work closely with. That's one way in which you avoid becoming one of those law enforcement officers who dies way too soon.

SUMMARY STEPS FOR SURVIVAL

1. Tragically, some officers lose their safety edge and become complacent with their years on the job.
2. Complacency can result in otherwise good officers forming bad safety habits.
3. Complacency is defeated when you realize that you don't know everything and still have a lot to learn.
4. You have a duty to challenge and defeat complacency whether you see it in yourself or a colleague.
5. You avoid complacency when you refuse to employ lazy short cuts in your safety routine.
6. Frequent self-examination helps avoid complacency and carelessness.