

Split-second decisions all part of cops' job

By Kathryn Reed

An agitated suspect danced around, moving toward the officers in an aggressive manner. To shoot or not to shoot? Use another tool like a taser or baton?

In a matter of seconds some of these "officers" shot at the suspect, others held back.

It turned out the "perp" was reaching for his wallet, and after that a cell phone to record what was going on. All the while he was acting like he was hyped up on meth.

While this was a make believe scenario last week, it resembles what real law enforcement officials are faced with on a regular basis. On this particular night it was the South Lake Tahoe Citizens Academy classmates who had to make the decision – to pull the trigger or not.

The academy is a free seven-week course designed to give residents a better understanding about how the city works as well as an opportunity to ask questions of staff. This reporter is part of the current class.

The class participated in three scenarios using guns with non-lethal bullets. The suspect was a real officer playing the part of the bad guy. Later that night video from the dash camera on a patrol car was shown in a debriefing. The camera only captures what is going on immediately in front; there is no way for it to track the entire scene.

The use of cameras was a big part of Police Chief Brian Uhler's opening presentation. South Lake Tahoe officers do not wear body cameras even though these devices are becoming more

popular in the wake of officer involved shootings.

He explained how the norm is the cameras are not on all the time, that officers must consciously activate them. For Uhler, he'd rather have his officers focused on the situation at hand instead of whether it should be filmed. After all, seconds can mean the difference between life and death.

A video showed how police cameras don't always capture everything that is going on. The outcome was that cameras could actually favor officers.

Uhler is hoping technology will be developed to better aid officers and the public to the point that one day cameras would be more seriously considered as a viable tool in South Lake Tahoe.

Officers Jeff Roberson, Mick Carlquist, Matt Morrison and Davis Spaid handled most of the nearly four-hour class session.

Many officers have gone to wearing vests instead of a belt to carry all of the tools of their trade. It's easier on their bodies; still they've been criticized it makes them look more militarized. Those vests weigh about 30 pounds for the average officer, closer to 70 pounds for SWAT.

Handcuffs, expandable baton, gun, taser, radio, flashlight, ammo, wireless microphone – it's all part of the standard equipment. The only thing really optional is to carry pepper spray.

Officers find the audio recorder most beneficial during domestic violence calls because the truth tends to come out in the heat of the moment. After the fact the couple might make up and recant their statements.

Most officers carry a Glock 22. Each quarter they must pass a shooting test. To practice there is a mobile range at the

department. They also have rifles. Shotguns with beanbags are used as a pain compliance tool, or to shoot out windows, as was the case in the most recent fire in the Tahoe Keys.

The type of crimes local officers contend with is all over the board, especially being a border and tourist town.

“For a city our size we have an inordinate amount of gang activity,” Detective Carlquist said.

He spent a good amount of time talking about the various cases he has worked in the eight years he’s been with the department.

A large part of what the 12-member SWAT unit contends with is gang related.

At the end of the night the class left with a greater appreciation for what the men and women in blue deal with 24 hours a day, and seemed to appreciate what Officer Morrison said: “Everyone behind the badge is human. We are not a robot.”