

We were ready, they weren't... 40 Years after Newhall, Are We Applying Lessons Learned?

By Fred Leland



This title is part of a quote taken from cop killers dating back to April 6th 1970 in what's known in law enforcement circles as the Newhall incident. *"They stopped us. **We were ready; they weren't.** One of them got real careless, so I wasted him."*

The Newhall incident itself is, or should be, well known to law enforcement as it left four cops killed in the line of duty and sparked modern day officer survival training. (For a full account and critique get [Brian McKenna's](#) book [Officer Down: Lessons from the Streets](#)). What I would like to discuss in this piece is our level of readiness and what, if anything, have we learned and applied as it relates to officer survival 40 years after this incident.

"An emotionally charged follow-up investigation followed the incident, but eventually led to a complete revision of procedures during high-risk and felony stops. Firearms procedures have also changed fundamentally due to this incident, and physical methods of arrest have been improved. The police baton and pepper spray have been added to the officer's arsenal, with more in-depth training in their use. In all, though the incident was a great tragedy, the reforms that stemmed from it have made uniformed officers more alert and better prepared for the dangers faced every day." ~ Newhall Incident Finding

Who is more ready today, us or them? What have we learned from the lessons 40 years ago? Have we made a serious cultural shift in the law enforcement mindset or has there only been talk and not enough 'walk' in actually applying these lessons paid for in blood and treasure? Here is a look at some of the lessons from the Newhall Incident; I will let you be the judge as to whether or not we have evolved much in the last 40 years.

Danger Signs- how have we improved in the area of recognizing the signs and signals of crime and danger? Do we understand patterns of behavior at a level that allows us to orient to what's going on? Body language or non-verbal communications--how many of us actually understand the non-verbal signs and signals and what they are telling us in the context of an unfolding set of circumstances. If we do understand, are we capable of taking initiative driven action using experience and lessons learned and apply tactics with insight, innovation and imagination to gain control?

Rushing in- when we receive a call or observe an unfolding set of circumstances, do we instantly develop a sense of urgency? Is that sense of urgency based on our observations or is something programmed inside us that may lead to a false sense of urgency? Will this false sense of urgency be controlled through your ability to think on your feet and adapt or will it be allowed to escalate to a point where emotions take hold and our ability to use our wits is lost and instead we respond recklessly? Will this false sense of urgency stop us from calling and waiting for back-up (when needed) which could heighten our risk?

Time and risk are factors we should always considered when we are dealing with unknown conditions and considering our approach options; move in skillfully, stay put (tactical loitering) and communicate, negotiate and deceive to gain voluntary compliance or tactically retreat and redeploy to gain the advantageous position when the time and conditions are right to engage.

*High Risk Encounters-*most incidents we handle the risks are unknown and we must use the OODA loop to gather, process and decide upon what to do with the information we gather. The vast majority of unknown risks situations end up resolved without any violence. Herein lies part of the problem: the success rate of dealing with and resolving complex scenarios without incident leads to “complacency” and the forming of bad habits.

We must treat all encounters as unknown risks. This includes high risks calls. We must begin to think of calls as *constantly evolving and complex circumstances* that seem one way one minute and the opposite the next. This mindset helps prevent false anticipation and hence expectations as to what will happen. One thing for sure about violence is that it is complex and chaotic. This leads to the only fact we know about conflict and violence and that fact it’s unpredictable. This unpredictability means we must practice adaptability which takes a person who has “superior situational awareness” and who can maintain this awareness in a mentally relaxed, calm manner. It also takes leadership within an organization that builds on mutual trust and allows decisions to be made at the frontline. In other words the ability to adapt requires adaptive leaders who train consistently to create and nurture the proper mindset and skills necessary to deal with the types of *constantly evolving and complex circumstances* we are required to handle.

Use of equipment- is an interesting factor to consider. There must be a balance of what we actually need and will use verses what we want. I cannot tell you the number of times I have complained about not having a certain piece of equipment and jumped up and down complaining it was something we needed to succeed only to have it sit somewhere on a shelf or closet not being used because the budget would not afford the training component. Equipment is useless unless we have personnel trained properly in its “effective use”.

I have found the more important factor to consider when it comes to equipment is ensuring the tools we have are tools that we know how to and can use effectively. Obviously this means effective training that enhances appropriate outcomes in accordance with our overall intent, to protect and serve.

Contact and cover- this is a basic tactical principle that has been discussed for the 40 years since the Newhall Incident yet still today it is not practiced appropriately. The *type-A personalities* in protection fields has anyone responding, trying to control the action. This may be honorable but it is even more foolish in the sense that, if we are all focusing on the one main issue, who is watching our surroundings and keeping things safe? Get in the habit of reading the scene and taking on responsibility you observe has not been taken. Do not be the duckling following mother duck just for the sake of following. Instead think and adapt as the situation dictates you should. We must practice the concepts we know are tactically sound. This requires discipline and dedication. The concept of contact/cover is one of the single most useful lives saving tactics we can utilize. So why not use it?

Mindset of the adversary-The title of this article is “*We were ready, they weren’t.*” This speaks to the fact that our adversary whoever he or she is is a walking, talking and thinking human being with his or her own objectives and plans. Our adversary’s plans just may be to take your life. This fact means we must always be considering our adversaries intent. This is done through a fine tuned and conditioned Boyd Cycle (OODA Loop) and the ability to apply what we know to a given set of circumstances.

Preparation and readiness requires a mindset on our part of adaptation and continued learning, unlearning and relearning in an effort to maintain the initiative in a given set of unique circumstances. It is not following a canned response or following check lists or policy and procedures. Canned responses, checklists and policy and procedures take insight, innovation and initiative away from the individual(s) on the frontline. This is part of the problem and nowhere near close to the solution.

The solution is found in our collective ability to constantly strive to be better at what we do and learn from experience, to include experience from others. Many have paid the ultimate sacrifice by making mistakes and having them exploited by those who would do them harm. These mistakes and lessons learned from them have been written and talked about for 40 years now and yet many of those killed in the line of duty today perish from the same mistakes being repeated again and again.

It’s time we change our mindsets and begin to walk the path to readiness and create and nurture full spectrum police officers with the ability to apply knowledge effectively in dynamic encounters. Then someone can write another article titled: **Stopping Evolving Threats through Preparation and Readiness!** And do so with confidence because it is so!

“If anything worthwhile comes of this tragedy, it should be the realization by every citizen that often the only thing that stands between them and losing everything they hold dear... is the man wearing a badge.” ~Governor Ronald Regan, speaking of the Newhall Incident

Stay Oriented!

Fred