



Old Cops Know "Stuff"

By Roy Huntington

If you want to make it home alive at the end of your shift, heed the advice of veteran cops.

After 24 years in the field on two different agencies, the most important thing I learned was to listen to old cops. "Old" is relative. It might mean 28 years old, having been on three more years than I was at the time, but these officers still knew more "stuff" than I did.

The big secret is to listen to these veteran cops, believe most of it, and put it into action in your own life. What I learned from older cops covered the gamut from on-duty techniques to off-duty survival (both in family life and real life), and it saved my life on several occasions I know of and probably many more times I never even realized.

What follows is a compendium of "stuff" I learned from my own experiences and from cops who were smarter than me. We all have this list buried somewhere inside, but we rarely make it a formal one, something we can point to, hand a trainee, or simply look at once in a while and say, "Yup, that's all true."

I was recently asked by a young man who was about to be hired by a police agency to give him "some advice," as he said, "so I don't get killed or anything." I wasn't sure about the "or anything" part, but the "get killed" part I could help with. So I made up this list. I take little credit for most of it and gladly give due to those hundreds of street- and battle-weary cohorts who I've worked around. Their collective experience amounts to thousands of "street years."

Combat Vs. Police Work

I used to bump into lots of military types in police training who would say, "I was an infantryman" or "I was a military policeman," etc., who thought they knew what being a cop entailed. They never did. Combat is very different from police work.

If you're a former military policeman or one of our returning vets who saw action in Iraq or Afghanistan in another capacity, my hat's off to you. And you can use what you learned, but it has virtually no bearing on 99.8 percent of what you'll be doing as a street cop back here in the good old US of A. That's not a bad thing, and it's not a good thing. It just is.

Don't Believe Them

Probably the single most important thing I recall from all my years is that people lie. Grandmas, that "nice kid down the block," wives, husbands, sisters, brothers, neighbors, store owners, delivery men, waitresses, garbage men, doctors, lawyers (of course), witnesses, and even suspects, they all lie. Not all the time, not even most of the time, but just about the time you want to believe somebody, you'll find out they're lying and be very disappointed.

And the worst thing about it is often the lie isn't intentional. People often feel a need to give you answers and will simply make them up or "fill in the blanks" in their memory in order to be helpful. If only we could make them understand it's so much easier and so much better for us and for them to simply say, "I don't know" or "I can't recall" and let us fill in the blanks.

Crooks always lie. Always. And they'll look you right in the eye when they do it, and smile, and be all serious and such, and you'll be tempted to believe them. Don't believe them. Ever.

Watch Their Hands

If they're going to kill you, they'll do it with their hands. Handcuff anyone you feel hinky about, even if they get upset about it. You can always say, "Sorry, Sarge, it seemed like the right thing to do at the time." I had to apologize for this once, but the guy was still sore about it and I figured he'd call in a complaint. Oh well, I lived, and besides, a day "on the beach" isn't always a bad thing. Search anyone you get close to in a field contact if things get even semi-serious or if you have the least suspicion about anything.

Search anyone you put into your car; even the nice fellow you're giving a ride to.

And watch their hands constantly.

Do a little test and watch a "regular" person's hands for a few minutes. You'll see how they move them, where they put them, and what they do with them. Now, the next time you are around a suspect, watch his or her hands. You'll see differences.

Suspects hold their hands more still or more active than regular people. They keep their palms open or close their fists. Or they keep their fingers stiff. Take note, and file it away. These observations aren't always things you can write down and say, "They do this with their hands," but you'll see the difference quickly.

Search and Search Again

If you take someone from another officer and you watch that officer search the suspect, search him again yourself before putting your own cuffs on and taking over his custody.

I once watched a fairly senior fellow officer search a drunk driver I was going to transport. He searched the suspect thoroughly. But I searched him again and found a Browning .25 auto in his right sock. Loaded. The senior cop was embarrassed. I was just happy I had searched him again.

Search everybody again prior to booking them into jail or before putting them into a station holding cell. Search the seat of your patrol car prior to placing a suspect inside and after you take them out. That's when you'll find the dope, weapons, notes, evidence, or whatever.

If you're talking to a subject, and he looks one way, then the other way, then back at you, and then does it again, he's probably looking for a place to run to or he is getting ready to knock the hell out of you and then run. Cuff him before he gets the idea planted more firmly in his skull.

Weapons and Tools

Carry a backup gun where you can get to it. If your agency doesn't allow backup guns, make a stink and get your union involved. Then make a bigger stink. Change agencies if they still say no. I've personally known about eight officers who have used backup guns to save their own lives or the lives of other officers. You probably know some, too. We carry fire extinguishers, why not backup guns?

Carry a folding knife where you can get to it. Carry a sturdy pair of pliers and both kinds of screwdrivers in your kit bag. Carry a small crowbar, too. Carry some leather work gloves and use them.

Which brings me to a very important piece of advice: protect your hands. They will save your life, so guard them zealously. Don't risk them by reaching into places and doing things you should be using tools for.

Don't put your hand into a suspect's pockets. You'll get stuck by needles. Buy a small metal detector like the Metal-Tec and use it. Buy puncture-resistant gloves and use them. If you have to, cut the suspect's pocket open first. So you may have to buy another pair of pants for some creep. So what.

Don't get in the habit of putting your own hands in your pockets. It looks slovenly and, besides, you may need those hands to save your life, so you want them available. Fast.

If you can, also carry a few spare, loaded mags in your gear bag, even cheap ten-round mags. When you need them, you'll need them immediately, with no time to load them. Remember the North Hollywood bank robbery shootout?

Think hard on this one: If your department does not allow you to carry a rifle, bring your own slugs for the shotgun. Buy premium rounds, like the Remington Reduced Recoil rounds, they have the same wallop and will not kick your ass when you shoot them. The slugs can poke holes through things like body armor.

Better yet, carry your own rifle, regardless. Even pistol caliber is better than nothing, although .223 or .308 or even a .30-30 Winchester is best.

I used to carry a cut-down Mini-14 in my "trunk bag" in the early '80s. No one ever knew I had it until I pulled it out on a felony stop on suspects who had been shooting. I got yelled at later, but the cops at the scene almost "high-fived" me when they saw it come out. This is, of course, a personal decision and you know your own department's frame of mind on the matter.

If any of this violates your particular department's policy, you'll have to make your own decisions on the matter.

Behind the Wheel

Don't drive fast. People can't hear your siren, and it's awfully easy to "over drive" and get to an intersection before drivers are alerted. You're no good to the officer who needs your cover if you crash and die.

If a pursuit gets crazy, stop it. Don't be a hero; don't get caught up in it all, just turn the siren off and slow down. You'll more than likely find the suspect again some day, or he'll kill himself because of the way he drives. Either way, you win.

Lots of Lights

Buy a good light. If the department doesn't issue you one, don't whine, just buy one. Buy a Streamlight, SureFire, Pelican, or the like. Keep a small, high-intensity light on your belt as a backup or to use in the daytime inside. Also carry a tiny light on your key chain.

You may think all of these lights are overkill. But once my main rechargeable light and my backup belt light both died in the middle of a felony stop, and I finished it with my penlight. Honest.

Carry your flashlight in your off-hand, not your gun hand. If it hits the fan, you don't want to have to pass your flashlight to your off-hand so you can draw your gun.

Stopping Cars

When making a traffic stop at night, approach from the passenger side, after walking behind your patrol car to get there. You'll see the driver looking in his outside rear-view mirror for you, until you tap on the passenger window. Then, you'll see him jump from being startled.

Except sometimes you'll see the gun in his hand as he waits for you. I did.

Point Your Gun

When in doubt, point your gun at people if you think they might try to kill you or somebody else. There's no law saying they have to shoot first or that you can only draw from your holster after the threat shows itself.

If that little voice inside your head says, "Hey, stupid, you'd better be ready to rock any second," then get ready to rock. Any second.

Sometimes that little voice is dead wrong. But you can always say you're sorry, and a surprising number of people are awfully nice about it once you explain what happened and why.

When a cop says something like, "I worked the streets for 10 years and never pulled my gun out of the holster," he's either lying or too stupid for words or worked inside filing. Don't listen to him either way.

Puncture Wounds

People will try to stab you with anything at hand, especially in the kitchen. And they are often very calm and cooperative just prior to stabbing you. They may even be smiling.

Pencils, screwdrivers, scissors, and any long, skinny thing can kill you. Remember, "Watch their hands."

Street Work

Always, always, always use good sense. If something feels wrong, simply believe it's wrong until you know for sure it's not. And even then, you're probably wrong not to listen to that first inner warning.

Just because the warrant or criminal history computer system is down doesn't mean you can't figure out if the turd you've stopped is a crook. Use your wits first. Use the computer last.

When you're at a family fight, get the kids out of the way first. Then, if you arrest the husband, be prepared for the wife to fight you, even if she's been a victim. And the kids don't have to watch it happen—again.

Contact and Cover

When contacting someone, especially a bad guy, use at least two officers or hold the situation still until cover is there. Then one cop should act as the cover officer while the other makes the actual contact, asks the questions, searches, etc.

The cover officer should never touch the suspect, ask questions, or otherwise get involved. His or her job is simply to watch the suspect, the crowd, the traffic, etc., and cover the contact officer. If it hits the fan, the cover officer should make strong, bold, decisive movements to gain control. Instantly.

If you're on a scene and are the contact officer and the cover officer starts to search the vehicle or become distracted, assume the role of cover officer and tell him he's got the contact now. Don't tolerate anything else. Your life is on the line.

Don't be hesitant to stay away from danger. There's no law saying you have to close on a suspect until you're ready to. Wait until it's safe to do so, or until you feel you have to close the distance due to circumstances beyond your control, like an immediate threat to a life.

Career Survival

Don't ever lie to cover up something another cop does. If Internal Affairs is interviewing you as the subject officer in an investigation, you're the last one interviewed, and they already know the answers to the questions they're asking you. Honest. And if you don't believe me, ask a former Internal Affairs officer.

There are only about 10 million other things, so add to this list, expand on it, improve it, and otherwise hone it. Then read it now and again. And don't forget to listen to and seek advice from older, experienced officers. Believe what they say.

Stay safe, and remember, people lie. Or did I say that already?

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