

Fatal Errors In Operational Safety

Take Advantage Of Lessons
Learnt From Adversity



By Richard Kay

The following list of fatal errors reflects crucial principles important to operational safety and survival. Officers should review this list regularly. It won't take long, and it could make the difference between life and death.

Operational Safety Errors

1. Losing professional focus

If you fail to keep your mind on the job while on duty, or you allow personal issues to distract you, you're susceptible to making errors. That can cost you or others their lives. When you're on duty, it's critical to stay focussed on your work, so take every possible step to avoid having personal or other non job-related issues compromise your professional concentration.

2. False courage

Taking unnecessary risks can be deadly. In situations where time allows, wait for backup if you're about to engage in a dangerous contact. There are few instances where you should try to make a dangerous apprehension alone and unaided.

3. Running tired

To do your job, you must be alert. Being asleep on the job is not only unprofessional, but it's dangerous to you and others. Get the rest you need, especially if you are doing shift work. Take breaks to refresh your psyche and maintain hydration throughout your shift.

4. Bad positioning

Never let anyone get in a better tactical position than you. Remember, there is no such thing as a routine situation. You should always maintain a position of tactical dominance, regardless of who you're dealing with or what seemingly mundane task you are about to undertake.

5. Overlooking danger signs

Officers should recognise danger signs, such as suspicious subject movements, strange activity, warnings that should alert you to approach with caution. Know your environment and watch for what is out of place. When your training and instincts tell you that something is wrong, trust your intuition.

6. Failing to watch the hands

One of the cornerstone principles of officer safety is knowing where a subject's hands are located and what they're doing with them. Are they reaching for a weapon, clenching a fist or readying themselves for an attack? Make sure you clear the hands, first and last.

7. Relaxing too soon

Repetition, false alarms, uneventful contacts...

all of these can lull officers into complacency. A key to officer survival is to train yourself to never let your guard down too early. Diligently maintain proper tactical awareness and resist the temptation to let your guard down during a contact, regardless of how well it's going or how uneventful and non-threatening it may seem.

8. Not handcuffing

If you have made an arrest, it is advisable to handcuff, regardless of who you're arresting. Failure to follow appropriate tactical protocol, like cuffing a subject, can increase risk. Once you've made an arrest, handcuff the person properly and professionally. And keep this fact in mind: Even juveniles and the elderly can create risk, and harm officers.

9. Poor searching

This is about as basic, and critical, as it gets. Thorough searches save officer lives. Sloppy or non-existent searches can cost officer lives. Search and search again, and remember, just because you find one weapon doesn't mean you've found them all. Search thoroughly until you are completely satisfied.

10. Poor weapon maintenance

Your firearm can prove to be your lifeline in a violent encounter. Make sure that all your duty equipment, especially your firearm, baton and handcuffs are clean, well-maintained and functioning properly. Thoroughly check before every shift and don't cut corners with pre-duty inspections. Additionally, ensure that you are well practised and ready, mentally and physically, to quickly and effectively control a threat.

Operational Safety Concepts

These concepts are principle-based strategies, generic rules for operational safety which provide an advantage for officers, regardless of what actual physical technique or strategy each may choose in conjunction with a concept. These concepts should form the foundation of any operational safety strategy.

Officer Survival Principles

These five principles have been synthesised from numerous officer encounters on the job:

- Watch the Palms – we are a hand-oriented society so most attacks will occur with the hands, either empty or with a weapon. Clearing a subject's hands should always be one of your first priorities, while maintaining awareness of their hand position and status should be an ongoing consideration throughout the situation.



- **Seek Cover** – in the event of weapon attacks, especially firearms, officers should always seek cover that offers protection from ballistic items. In the event of an impact or edged weapon assault, cover will also provide protection.

- **Maintain Distance** – safe separation is vital to increasing reaction time. The right distance means that you position yourself so that you are totally comfortable to control the situation, while your opponents feel comfortable too – but only in a sense that they perceive no threat from you. In fact, although they do not realise it, you are the one in control.

- **Keep the Weapon Back** – if you use a weapon, such as a baton or firearm, keep your weapon close to your person, especially if the subject is closing the distance. Extended away from your body, your weapons can be grabbed or deflected, allowing the subject to enter your close personal space. Where possible, move towards your weapon side, so your body position also protects against weapon retention situations.

- **Control the Dominant Hand** – most people are right-handed so, in a confrontation, endeavour to control/subdue the subject's dominant hand first. Conversely, when releasing the subject, release the dominant hand last. This denies them use of their strong or comfortable hand. Look for clues as to which hand is dominant... watch, writing, blading, but remain alert for ambidextrous people.

Physical Control Principles

If subject resistance escalates, use this three-step process for physical control and personal safety:

- **Abort Intent** – as thought/intent precedes physical action, this stage entails using distractions to short-circuit the mental-to-physical process of attack and provide opportunities for disengagement or control. Strategies can range from verbal (questions) or physical (strikes), and can be deployed by the officer or by a third party (using either strategy).

- **Break Balance** – success in a physical confrontation involves balance. Without balance, you cannot move efficiently or generate power properly. Officers should maintain their own balance while disrupting that of the subject, providing the officer with the advantage of movement and power.

- **Create Distance** – distance provides reaction and assessment time. With distance, you can

choose to disengage or consider other control strategies. Distance also relates to balance. By keeping slightly out of range of the subject's attacks, the subject will most likely over-extend to reach you, destabilising themselves in the process.

Survival Reaction Time

In any physical confrontations, the principle of action/reaction is important for officers to understand. Based on perceptual and cognitive processes, it governs reaction time and influences to a large degree whether officer strategies succeed or fail. Officers should understand this process, how it works, and how it influences their operational safety strategies.

There are four key steps when reacting to a threat:

- **Perception** involves perceiving an attack through your senses...eyes, ears and intuition. The earlier you perceive an attack, through cues such as verbal, non-verbal and environment, the sooner you can react.

- **Evaluation** involves deciding what type of threat is present and what risk it poses to you.

- **Formulation** involves selecting an appropriate response to the attack, based on your evaluation of type, threat level, experience, etc.

- **Initiation** involves the actual physical reaction to the incoming attack. This is largely based on what information is available in your mid-brain, the part that operates under stress and is educated by means of stress inoculation training.

The role of public safety personnel is to move towards danger and to step into potential harm's way, when logic and survival sense promotes the opposite. To paraphrase George Orwell, "people sleep safe in their beds because brave men stand ready to confront those who would do them harm". Tragically, far too many officers have paid a heavy price to ensure that public safety is maintained. Officers should learn from these operational lessons, or potentially risk the consequences. ■

Richard Kay is an internationally certified tactical instructor-trainer and dynamic force-on-force simulation trainer. He is the founder of Modern Combatives, a provider of realistic operational safety training for security and public safety agencies, nationally and internationally. For more information, visit www.moderncombatives.com.au