





Weapon Retention: Close Contact Awareness For Officer Safety

By Richard Kay

It is a tragic reality that, unfortunately, many officers are assaulted with their own firearms; a situation that can be prevented through the use of simple principles and strategies. However, many officers that carry firearms have never trained in, or rarely train in, strategies for firearm retention – a critical yet often overlooked skill of firearms training.

The basic rule of thumb is that an officer should protect their highest use of force carried, meaning that if a subject grabbed for your baton, protect your firearm. Fighting at close range over a lesser weapon may leave officers open to the subject changing tactics and grabbing the higher

option whilst the officer is otherwise engaged.

The overt action of a subject reaching toward an officer's firearm may be considered a potentially deadly force assault. Whilst officers should respond with an action appropriate to their threat perception, and although an officer may perceive deadly force, in many retention situations drawing a holstered firearm out of the holster may only succeed in helping the subject get control of the firearm. Other tactics may provide a more realistic chance to stop the assault. In any violent confrontation you should verbalise strongly, as this may be enough to stop the subject and/or at the very least will aid in getting back-up and help warn bystanders.



AWARENESS PHASE

During initial encounter with a subject, officers should evaluate the threat by paying attention to verbal and non-verbal cues that could indicate a subject's intentions of possibly attacking the officer's firearm, such as:

- target glancing or eyeing officer's firearm;
- clenching hands or rubbing hands on clothes or through hair;
- shift in stance or shoulders;
- increased rate of breathing; and
- ignoring officer's commands.

Officers should maintain proper distance, balance and positioning relative to the subject. In crowds, it may be difficult for officers to maintain an ideal reactionary distance from subjects. During a confrontation, officers should be aware of the subject's hands and their relationship to the officer's firearm. The officer should use tactics that would not compromise the retention of their firearm.

PREVENTION PHASE

The firearm prevention phase focusses on the officer's response to situations before the firearm is grabbed, where a subject is reaching for the officer's firearm but has not yet touched it. The officer should attempt to prevent the subject from gaining the advantage of grasping the firearm.

Holstered Firearm Prevention

This is an immediate reaction when a subject reaches for a holstered firearm. Maintain a proper stance with hands above the waist and in front of the body. An important aspect of holstered firearm retention is to prevent the attacker from having a clear grasp of it. However, when an officer is surprised by an assault, a natural reflex will be for both hands to come up.

Presented Firearm Prevention

If the subject is within arm's reach of an unholstered firearm, retract the firearm close to the body while keeping the muzzle on target and firearm canted so the slide will not jam during discharge. Verbalise strongly. Depending on the situation, the officer may choose to strike the subject or discharge the firearm.

RETENTION PHASE

The firearm retention phase focusses on the officer's response to situations after the firearm is grabbed. This is a reactive response to a subject who was too fast or too strong, or caught the officer by surprise and was able to grasp the officer's firearm.

HOLSTERED FIREARM RETENTION

This retention technique reinforces retention mechanisms built into the holster. Holsters with a high level of retention often have clips that catch the trigger guard and hold the firearm in the holster.

Immediately secure the firearm in the holster by placing both hands on the firearm and pushing down and in towards your body. The holster type will determine how to position the hands to utilise the holster retention. Use the push/pull concept and move in the same direction the subject is applying force. Deliver strikes if appropriate but be wary of techniques that compromise balance and control of the firearm. Continue with strong verbalisation until the subject releases or a different tactic is necessary. After releasing the subject's grab, create safe separation. Ensure adequate distance from the subject so they cannot once again grab the firearm, and consider less lethal options or disengagement as options to drawing firearm.

PRESENTED FIREARM RETENTION

In attacks where a subject has grabbed an officer's firearm, there could be the imminent threat of potential death or serious injury. If an officer believes a real and impending threat to life exists and the muzzle is pointed at the subject, discharging the firearm may be a plausible option. If the firearm is grabbed from the front or side, the officer can distract by striking whatever target presents itself and then rip the firearm away.

FIREARMS TAKE-BACK PHASE

This is the officer's response to a subject who was able to grab and take primary possession of the officer's firearm so the officer's initial action is to take back control of the firearm.

Firearm Stripped from Holster or Hand

The officer's initial response is the recognition the firearm has been taken from the holster. At this stage the officer has to make a decision whether to engage the subject and attempt to regain the firearm, or to disengage, create distance and seek cover. This will depend largely on the situation, the officer's reaction time, skills, mindset, etc.

Whatever the decision, the officer should immediately move away from the line of the muzzle. If the officer decides to engage, secure

the subject's wrist and hand while their other hand secures the firearm. The officer should grab whatever is available – the arm, wrist or hand. The critical element is to secure the firearm and subject's hand, to prevent the firearm from being pointed at the officer.

Maintaining balance, the officer can strike to targets of opportunity. Once the officer feels they can effectively strip the firearm back from the subject, they should do so. The officer will initiate an outside or an inside take back based on the hand the subject uses to grab the officer's firearm. The technique is the same motion for inside and outside take backs. Always turn the firearm away from the officer and towards the subject, and pull the firearm out from the weakest part of the subject's grip.

The techniques for a firearm stripped from the holster from the side are the same as just described from the front. If the firearm is stripped from the holster from the back, the techniques are also the same. However, the officer's dominant hand should be on the subject's wrist regardless if the subject strips with the right or left hand. The officer's primary concern should be controlling the firearm and eventually regaining possession.

Weapon retention should be an integral and practiced aspect of operational safety training, and should extend to any weapon carried on duty – firearm, baton, taser, etc. Learning to effectively use a weapon involves knowledge acquisition (justification, when to use) and skill acquisition (how to use), but knowing how to maintain safe and effective control of the weapon is equally critical for operational safety – an important aspect that officers should NOT overlook. Train it regularly and train it realistically, but above all, train it!



Richard Kay is an internationally certified tactical instructor-trainer, Director and Senior Trainer of Modern Combatives, a provider of operational safety training for the public safety sector. For more information, please visit www.moderncombatives.com.au