



# Spotlight on Safety

*Officer Safety, Wellness, and Resiliency*



## VEHICLE SAFETY: FOUR BASICS THAT MAY SAVE LIVES

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# VEHICLE SAFETY: FOUR BASICS THAT MAY SAVE LIVES

Legendary National Football League coach Vince Lombardi based his success principles on mastery of the fundamentals. His famous quote, "Excellence is achieved by the mastery of the fundamentals," applies to winning both on the football field and in the law enforcement arena. The basics, or fundamentals, of officer safety are concepts that endure and help law enforcement officers survive in this dangerous profession; however, is it possible that, over the course of time, officers may begin to neglect the basics? Does the very nature of the word "basics" cause us to think that we are already proficient at them? Do we believe that they do not need to be revisited?

The landmark studies "Killed in the Line of Duty,"<sup>1</sup> "In the Line of Fire,"<sup>2</sup> and "Violent Encounters,"<sup>3</sup> conducted by Dr. Tony Pinizzotto, Ed Davis, and Chuck Miller, respectively, point out a common theme: Officers are getting killed and injured because they are not adhering to the basics. Some of the basic principles being violated involve vehicle safety.

Another study, "Deadly Calls and Fatal Encounters,"<sup>4</sup> echoed those findings. This study revealed that over a five-year period from 2010 to 2015, an astounding 40 percent of line-of-duty deaths were vehicle-related. Even more disturbing is that 53 percent of those fatal crashes involved officers responding to an "officer needs assistance" call. This begs the question, "Are we sometimes the biggest threat to our own safety?"

Large amounts of time, energy, and money go into improving officer safety. Let's look at four ways to dramatically improve officer safety that require minimal resources.

"Excellence is achieved by the mastery of the fundamentals."

-Vince Lombardi



## SEAT BELT USAGE

In 2011, the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration (NHTSA) conducted an analysis of almost 30 years of crash data and found that 42 percent of all law enforcement officers killed in traffic crashes were not wearing seat belts.<sup>5</sup> That number may actually be higher because the NHTSA could not determine whether the officers were wearing seat belts in 13 percent of the cases. We know that seat belts save lives; yet in 2018, we are still having this conversation. Is this a mind-set and beliefs issue? Being honest with ourselves is imperative. Do we, as officers, sometimes feel that we are invincible or that "those things happen to someone else and not me"? Why else would officers not wear their seat belts?

Although most agencies have policies regarding seat belt usage, many officers violate policies and refuse to wear seat belts. Some officers believe that wearing seat belts is an officer safety issue because the belts might prevent them from quickly exiting their vehicles or get snagged on their duty belts.

The antidotes to this belief are training and practice. If officers believe that it is too difficult to get a seat belt undone in an emergency, then perhaps we need to institute training and practice so officers can become proficient in doing this. We practice countless other skills to improve officer safety, and the fatality rate for vehicle-related incidents is too high to ignore the basic concept of seat belt usage.

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02

## A CULTURE OF SPEED

In the studies previously mentioned, excessive vehicle speeds were a contributing factor in many officer fatalities. Just as we know that seat belts save lives, we know that excessive speed is dangerous. So why do many officers operate their vehicles in this way? Can this behavior be attributed to a belief in invincibility? In any emergency situation to which we are called, arriving there safely is the number-one priority. If an officer is involved in a crash while responding to a call, resources must be diverted to that crash and the response to the original call may be reduced. Law enforcement officers need to consider driving for the weather conditions and providing other drivers with sufficient reactionary time, since they may not hear a siren, realize how fast the other driver is traveling, or know from which direction a first responder is coming. As mentioned earlier, 53 percent of fatal crashes involved officers responding to assist another officer calling for help. How do emotions play into responding to this type of call? Officers know that if they were called for help, they would want support as quickly as possible. The number-one priority must be arriving safely to assist an officer, even if it means slowing down. Good decision making saves lives, period. Wear your seat belt and learn how to disengage from it quickly during critical incidents. It is as simple as that.

03

## POSITIONING OF VEHICLE

It is not enough to drive based on normal vehicle operations, especially in light of ambush attacks on officers. In today's world, officers must be cognizant of how they position their vehicles, both while driving and while parked. While driving, officers must be aware of their surroundings, especially when coming to a stop in traffic. Officers should always attempt to give themselves escape routes by leaving enough distance between their vehicles and the ones in front of them. While stopped, they must constantly remain aware of the area around their vehicles. Officers should give thought to where their vehicles are positioned when parked. Locations should be chosen that do not allow for someone to approach unseen from the rear or sides of the vehicles and that allow for escape routes. While working on reports or other tasks, officers must maintain their fields of vision and not get so engrossed in typing or writing that they are not continually looking up and scanning the area. At night, lighting issues must be addressed. Officers should avoid being in positions in which they are clearly visible in the interior lights of their vehicles but cannot see out into the darkness around them.

04

## SLEEP IS IMPORTANT

Many factors affect an officer's performance; however, operating on a sleep deficit translates into a dangerous situation—one that is both predictable and preventable. Let's look at the facts. One sleepless night can impair the brain activity governing complex decision making. Combine that with the fact that being awake for 19 straight hours is equivalent to having a blood alcohol content of .05 percent, and you can see why getting insufficient sleep is not only a vehicle safety issue but, overall, an officer safety issue.<sup>6</sup> Studies have shown that getting the right amount of sleep—between seven and nine hours each night—improves your ability to concentrate and your cognitive decision-making skills. The bottom line is that sleep is important. Make sure you get enough sleep before each shift, because being drowsy can increase your risk of being involved in a motor vehicle accident.

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## CONCLUSION

Operating a vehicle is one of the most basic things that law enforcement officers do as part of their jobs. The basics of vehicle safety must be embraced and not taken lightly. The stakes are too high and the consequences too great to ignore these fundamentals. Although they are basic principles, the sobering statistics show that, as a profession, law enforcement must improve dramatically in this area. By implementing some of the ideas presented here, we can start to reverse the trend of fatal crashes and greatly enhance officer safety and survivability. Policies and training can provide direction, but it is up to the individual officer to take control of his or her own safety.

- 1 "Killed in the Line of Duty," Federal Bureau of Investigation, 1992, <https://www.valorforblue.org/Documents/Publications/Secure/>.
- 2 "In the Line of Fire," Federal Bureau of Investigation, 1997, <https://www.ncjrs.gov/pdffiles1/Digitization/168972NCJRS.pdf>.
- 3 "Violent Encounters," Federal Bureau of Investigation, 2006, <https://www.ncjrs.gov/App/Publications/abstract.aspx?ID=253329>.
- 4 "Deadly Calls and Fatal Encounters," Community Oriented Policing Services, U.S. Department of Justice, in conjunction with the National Law Enforcement Officers Memorial Fund, <http://nleomf.org/programs/cops/cops-report.html>.
- 5 "Preventing Traffic-Related Line-of-Duty Deaths," May 2011, <https://cops.usdoj.gov/pdf/OSWG/IACPTrafficReport-May2011.pdf>.
- 6 "Sleep Deprivation: What Does It Mean for Public Safety Officers?" <https://www.nij.gov/journals/262/pages/sleep-deprivation.aspx>.



Mr. Philip A. Carlson's career in law enforcement spans more than 35 years. During this time, he has served as a law enforcement officer and trainer at the state and local levels and at the federal level as a lead senior instructor and subject expert. Mr. Carlson began his law enforcement career at the Cromwell, Connecticut, Police Department and served for more than seven years as a patrol officer, a field training officer, a detective, and a traffic homicide investigator. He was also a deputy sheriff in the Brevard County, Florida, Sheriff's Office, assigned to the Selective Enforcement Unit, Motorcycle Division. For more than nine years, Mr. Carlson served as Deputy Sheriff First Class/Field Training Officer in the Orange County, Florida, Sheriff's Office. Following that role, he was a senior instructor and a subject expert for the Federal Law Enforcement Training Centers. In this capacity, he planned, developed, implemented, reviewed, and evaluated the training and development programs.

In 2010, Mr. Carlson became the Director of Corporate Security for a global telecommunications and energy marketing company that operates in 24 countries on 4 continents, with a corporate headquarters base of approximately 500 employees and more than 100,000 independent sales representatives around the world. Mr. Carlson has been recognized by agencies, businesses, and organizations for his contributions to the field of law enforcement. He also received a lifesaving award for saving the life of an infant.

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