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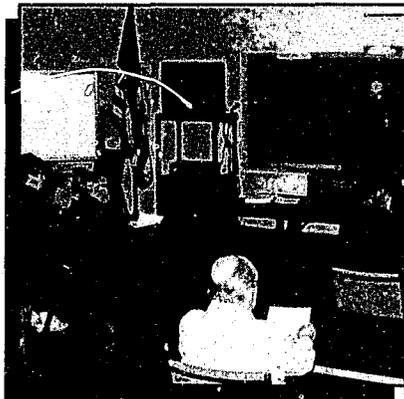
Law Enforcement Bulletin



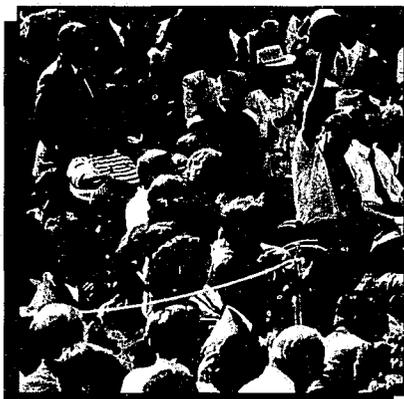
The Americans with Disabilities Act



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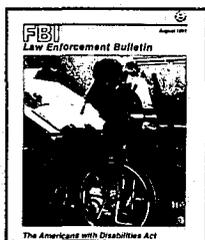


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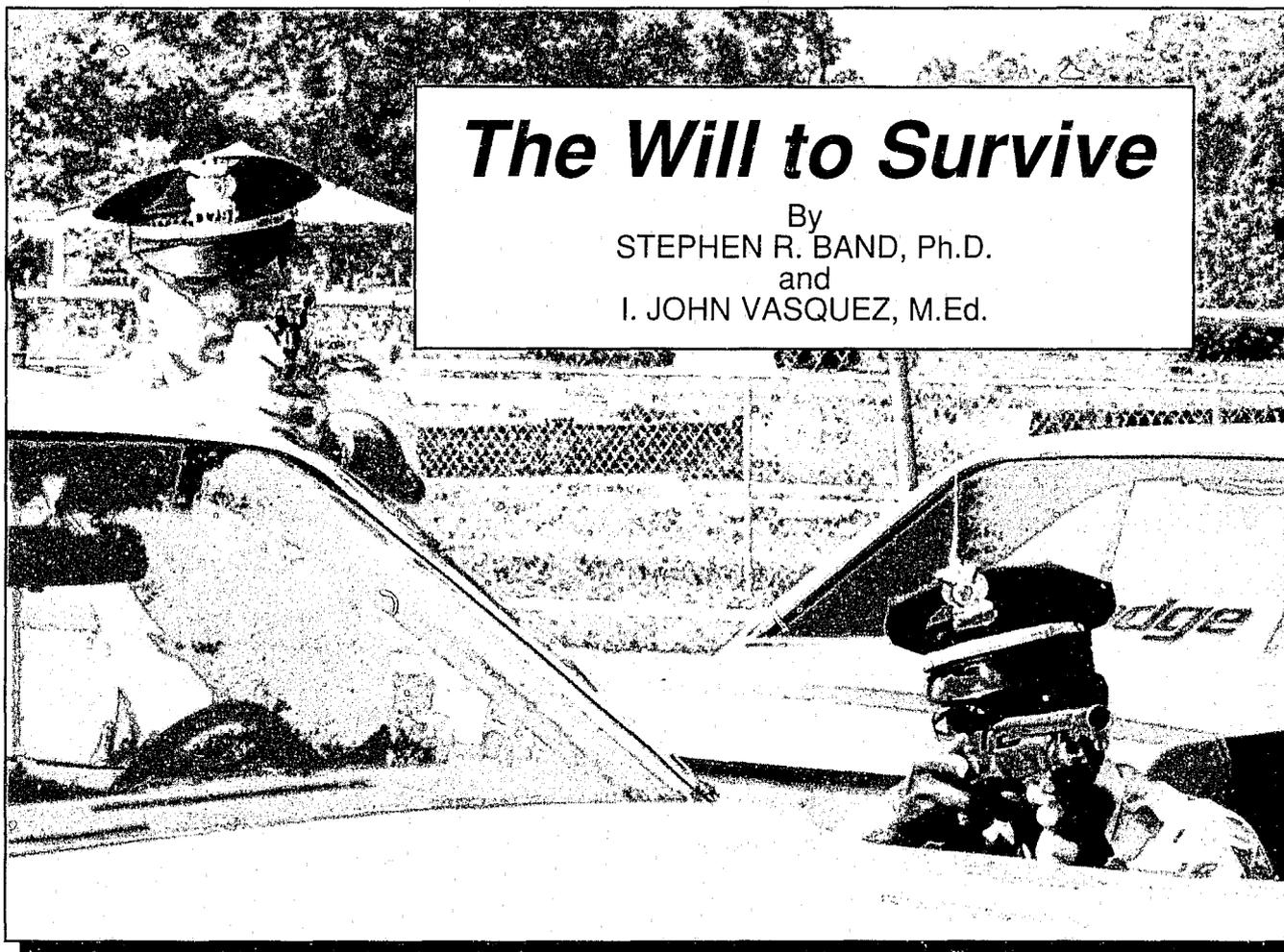
William S. Sessions, Director

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The Will to Survive

By
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and
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Shots are fired! One subject is down, and three police officers are wounded. Another armed subject appears in the doorway, and two of the officers, stunned at the sight of their wounds, are unable to defend themselves. But, the third officer fights on, firing until the second subject is incapacitated.

This scenario could be an excerpt from a movie, but unfortunately, it is all too real. Each day, law enforcement officers across the Nation face life-and-death situations. In fact, between 1979 and 1988, 841

police officers were feloniously killed in scenarios such as this.¹

Can law enforcement officers encounter a life-threatening, violent confrontation and go home at the end of the day? Do they have the will to survive and fight on when faced with death? The answers to these questions go beyond combat tactics and accuracy with a weapon. One element is still missing: Survivability—the mental preparation and personal will to survive.

The Operations Resource and Assessment Unit (ORAU) at the FBI Academy, Quantico, Virginia, con-

ducted a pilot study and sought expert opinions in order to identify the human attributes associated with survivability. This article will discuss the available background research and will review the FBI's findings.

BACKGROUND RESEARCH

In the media, astronauts and pilots have often been referred to as having "the right stuff"—personality characteristics that would aid their survival in critical situations.² In fact, as part of their ongoing research, the National Aeronautics and Space Administration (NASA) and the



Special Agent Vasquez



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University of Texas attempted to identify "right stuff" personality traits in pilot selection.³ As a result, the following two prominent personality orientations were linked with successful pilot behavior under dangerous flying conditions: 1) Goal-oriented behavior, and 2) the capacity to empathize with others.

Combat psychiatry also offers insight into human performance under battle conditions.⁴ Research in this area has examined the causes and prevention of combat stress reaction (CSR) in relation to surviving life-threatening circumstances. CSR, sometimes referred to as "battle fatigue," prevents soldiers from fighting and may be theoretically viewed as behavior that opposes survival.

Further research identified leadership, devotion to duty, decisiveness, and perseverance under stress as significant attributes.⁵ And, in his studies into the area of survivability, S.E. Hobfoll states, "...counting your losses when pre-

serving resources is fatal...."⁶ In essence, preoccupation with thoughts about loss may negatively affect one's capacity to survive a possibly lethal confrontation. Thus, merely avoiding thoughts associated with loss may enhance survivability.

This concept of preserving resources can be exemplified best through the comments of Gunnery Sergeant Carlos Hathcock, U.S. Marine Corps (Retired). Hathcock is credited with 93 confirmed kills as a sniper during two combat tours in South Vietnam.⁷ A soft-spoken, unassuming man of honor, Hathcock compared his behavior just prior to and during an operation as isolating himself into an "invisible bubble." This state of mind would "block thoughts of physiological needs, home, family, etc., except the target." The amount of time in the "bubble," lasting from a few hours to several consecutive days, depended not only on the circumstances surrounding his objective but also on

adjusting to conditions where a trivial mistake could cost him his life.⁸ As he reflected on his distinguished military career, Hathcock also mentioned a number of other attributes he considered necessary for survival. Among these were patience, discipline, and the ability to concentrate completely on a specific task.

THEORY

Cognitive/behavioral psychological theory offers insight into the benefits of mentally rehearsing possible reactions to life-threatening situations. According to one theory, developing a plan of action could enhance one's perception of effectiveness, and therefore, affect an officer's ability to survive. In fact, as A. Bandura states:

"People who believe they can exercise control over potential threats do not conjure up apprehensive cognitions and, therefore, are not perturbed by them.... those who believe they cannot manage potential threats experience high levels of stress and anxiety arousal. They tend to dwell on their coping deficiencies and view many aspects of their environment as fraught with danger. Through some inefficacious thought they distress themselves and constrain and impair their level of functioning."⁹

A classic example of cognitive rehearsal in law enforcement is provided by C.R. Skillen.¹⁰ According to Skillen, successful patrol officers imagine the best approach to emer-

agencies that could occur during a tour of duty. They then decide upon the best and fastest route from one location to another, should the need arise. These officers also imagine "what if" situations and develop effective responses in case a similar confrontation occurs.

This type of cognitive rehearsal activity has proven to be effective in relieving fears and in enhancing performance in stressful encounters. However, mental preparation can work against officers who believe that if shot, they will certainly die. When reinforced by appropriate training and one's value system, these attributes and behaviors may provide a law enforcement officer with the ability to survive a life-threatening situation.

FBI'S RESEARCH AND PRELIMINARY FINDINGS

Behavior identified in the background research and theoretically linked to survivability was later summarized to develop a pilot study questionnaire. The FBI then distributed this questionnaire in late 1989 and early 1990 to a broad group of Federal, State, and local law enforcement officers attending the FBI Academy in Quantico, Virginia. The questionnaire was also administered at work or training sites in Illinois and California. In all, a total of 207 questionnaires were administered and completed.

Questionnaire

The questionnaire asked respondents to rank various behaviors and traits, developed from background research. Not all the behaviors and traits are associated with law en-

forcement, but every one has been linked to survival. (See table 1.) Ranking ranged from little or no importance to extremely important. Law enforcement officers rated each factor in terms of its overall impor-

tance for effective performance in a short-term, violent law enforcement confrontation. Effective performance was defined as a violent confrontation that requires a lawful, combative response where the officer con-

Table 1

SURVIVAL BEHAVIORS AND TRAITS

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Honor • Physical fitness • Useful training • Emotional stability • Aggressiveness • Hatred for adversary • Street savvy • Confidence in weapon • Duty • Fear of death • Decisiveness • Intelligence • Patriotism • Self-esteem • Anger • Religious convictions • Personal leadership ability • Anticipated reward or recognition • Believing oneself effective in combat • Loyalty (to the law enforcement agency) • Perseverance under stress 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Having a leader/supervisor who is trusted • Having a leader/supervisor who is a positive role model • Having a law enforcement agency that is supportive to personnel and backs up officers' decisions made on the street • A mutual responsibility among officers working together • Individual morale/supportive family and/or friends at home • Maintaining a winning attitude • Confidence in one's ability to perform in a confrontation • Previous combat experience • Weather conditions • Strong interpersonal bonds among a squad or shift that works together • Mental rehearsal of combat action prior to action • A belief that one's destiny is controlled by oneself and not outside forces
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tinued to function even though the final outcome could be death for the officer or adversary.

Findings

Analyses of the pilot study data revealed the items listed below as those perceived to be most critical to officer survival. The items appear in order of importance, except for items 3 through 5, which are of equal value.

1) *Self-confidence in performance*—The officer's belief that a critical task can be performed effectively with a high probability of success.

2) *Training*—The officer's belief that prior training has been effective, and if applied, will increase the possibility of survival in deadly confrontations.

3) *Effectiveness in combat*—The officer's mental frame of reference in which the officer can visualize victory in a deadly confrontation.

4) *Decisiveness*—The officer's ability to make rapid and accurate decisions when confronted with a critical situation.

5) *Perseverance under stress*—The officer's ability to continue to perform critical tasks mentally and physically when confronted with stressful situations.

DISCUSSION

The concept of survivability represents a dynamic set of behaviors that should be considered in



“Only through proper training in behaviors that ensure survival can law enforcement prepare to meet the anticipated occupational challenges of the future.”

relation to certain law enforcement environments. Life-threatening events associated with undercover operations, uniformed patrol, SWAT operations, and other specific hazardous law enforcement missions require personnel who can survive the virulent stressors associated with these unique operations.¹¹

Self-confidence in performance, training, effectiveness in combat, decisiveness, and perseverance under stress were identified in this pilot study as tantamount to law enforcement officer survival. However, these findings are preliminary and should not be considered conclusive. Further research, in the form of an enhancement/enrichment course

offered to new FBI Agents in training, is planned for 1991. The data compiled during this course will then be analyzed and will, hopefully, lead to more indepth research focusing on the five behaviors mentioned previously that are most often associated with survivability. It is hoped that law enforcement officers who have been exposed to such training opportunities will increase their potential for survival in life-or-death situations. Only through proper training in behaviors that ensure survival can law enforcement prepare to meet the anticipated occupational challenges of the future.

LEB

Footnotes

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² T. Wolfe, *The Right Stuff* (New York: Bantam Books, 1983).

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⁵ R. Gal, “Courage Under Stress,” in S. Breznitz, ed. *Stress in Israel* (New York: Van Nostrand Reinhold Company, 1983).

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⁷ C. Henderson, *Marine Sniper* (New York: Berkley Books, 1986).

⁸ I.J. Vasquez, “An Interview with Carlos Hathcock,” unpublished interview notes, Virginia Beach, Virginia, 1989.

⁹ A. Bandura, “Human Agency in Social Cognitive Theory,” *American Psychologist*, No. 44, 1989, pp. 1175-1184.

¹⁰ C.R. Skillen, *Combat Shotgun Training*, (Springfield, Illinois: Charles C. Thomas, 1982).

¹¹ S. R. Band and C.A. Manuele, “Stress and Police Officer Job Performance: An Examination of Effective Coping Behavior,” *Police Studies*, No. 10, 1987, pp. 122-131.