

Give us the tools and we will finish the job. Sir Winston Churchill, 1941.

Training Police Family Members, Part 1



Does your agency offer training programs to the families of officers on the issues relating to being a family member of a law enforcement officer? Should it even consider such a program? If a program was offered, what topics should be presented? Certainly, “personal safety” would be at the top of the list, or should it be?

Are officers’ family members ever in a high-risk encounter, or is this issue non-existent? Consider an incident that occurred in Mariana, FL in January

2007. Mellie McDaniel was driving home after grocery shopping. She called her husband, Jackson County, FL Sheriff John McDaniel, from her cell phone. She told her husband that two men in a tan Ford Crown Victoria followed her. Sheriff McDaniel told his wife not to go home, but it was already too late.

As Mellie McDaniel pulled into the driveway of her home, the tan Ford Crown Victoria pulled in the driveway, immediately behind her, now blocking her vehicle. McDaniel heard his wife scream, and then his wife’s phone sud-

denly went dead. All sheriffs’ deputies in the area were immediately dispatched to McDaniel’s home.

The first responding deputy was Deputy Harold “Mike” Altman, who arrived about 2 minutes after he heard the radio call. Altman called in the stolen license plate numbers on the tan Ford. Altman’s voice next came on the radio again as he was shouting, “Get off me!”

McDaniel and two additional deputies arrived about 2 minutes after Altman called in his arrival. Two men, who were now behind the tan Ford,



immediately fired upon the sheriff and the two deputies. Dozens of shots rang out, and then silence.

The sheriff and the two deputies were unharmed during this gun battle. The two men lay behind the tan Ford, one shot dead after receiving wounds to his leg, stomach, underarm and neck. The other died minutes later after being shot twice in the stomach.

Altman's lifeless body lay along side Mellie McDaniel's body, in front of her vehicle. Mellie McDaniel was found shot execution-style with a gunshot wound to the back of her head as she kneeled. Altman was shot in the face. That wound apparently did not kill the deputy, so he was shot twice more in the back.

Bleach, latex gloves, vinegar, handcuffs, plastic garbage bags, duct tape, several firearms and extra ammunition were found inside the gunmen's Ford. The killers also wore disguises, which included a wig, phony moustache, and makeup. One killer, Lionel Sands, was dressed commando style in camouflage, and the other, Michael Brown, dressed somewhat like a plump "Blues Brother."

The reason behind this attack? Lionel Sands was suspected of killing his wife, Gail Sands, in 2001 for the apparent purpose of collecting about \$1 million through various insurance policies. It seems that Sheriff McDaniel and his wife were the focus

of a planned kidnapping by Sands, with Brown as his accomplice.

Several unsigned letters were also found in the tan Ford. The letters indicated that Sands was going to have McDaniel and his wife sign them. One letter, addressed to Gail Sands' mother in St. Louis, was written to look like it came from the sheriff. This letter exonerated Sands of all wrongdoing in his wife's death.

Another letter, supposedly written by Mellie McDaniel, alleged that her husband, Sheriff John McDaniel, was involved in an outlandish and ongoing criminal enterprise with federal agents, government attorneys and other government officials. This criminal enterprise, according to one letter, was responsible for distributing drugs and stolen goods. The letter stated that Lionel Sands was framed for Gail Sands' death because he discovered this criminal activity.

Certainly, the case of Sheriff McDaniel and his wife was a worst-case scenario when it comes to the safety of an officer's family member. Could this incident have a different outcome if Mellie McDaniel had received training concerning special safety issues for a law enforcement officer's family?

"Family members need to be trained how to act and how you will act when it comes to personal safety," stated Tobin Babcock, training coordi-

nator with the Long Beach, IN Police. Maybe training would have saved Mellie McDaniel's life, and ultimately prevented the death of Deputy Mike Altman.

Sergeant Steve Papenfuhs of the San Jose, CA Police believes that most law enforcement agencies have neither the time nor the funding to properly train family members of police officers. If so, each individual police officer is then primarily responsible for providing relevant personal safety related training to family members. Perhaps law enforcement agencies could develop a document on the "dos and don'ts of personal safety for the family member." Maybe an online or computer-based course would address these training needs.

Papenfuhs believes that certain topics should be addressed. Topics should include how to call 9-1-1 in an efficient and effective manner and what critical information is needed in order to quickly get to a call-taker or dispatcher should an off-duty officer / family member engage a suspect. Another topic is target hardening for when in the home; while in a vehicle as a vehicle passenger or while driving; and when on foot.

Dave Smith, lead instructor for the popular Calibre Press "Street Survival" seminar, believes that training is key. Smith said, "When we talk about and train for 'off-duty survival,' we have to include our family members in many aspects. Let your family know that you have an obligation to keep yourself, your family, and the community safe on or off-duty. More importantly, teach them that as members of a police family, they also share this obligation."

Which members of an officer's family should receive safety-related training? The exact safety-related curriculum for an officer's family members is dependent on the law, department policies and agency culture, personal beliefs, physical abilities and age. Certainly, you would address a spouse differently than a young child.

The training of police family members may, if at all possible, be offered by the employing law enforcement agency, but it certainly cannot be mandated. Adult family members or significant others should be encouraged to attend the training. The family should be told why this training is important and why it's worth an investment of their time.

The curriculum for this personal safety program could be modified from a curriculum on personal safety or self-protection awareness that is available to the general public. An agency trainer could also be given the responsibility to research this important topic. Material can then be developed for the individual agency along with a specific target audience, such as curriculum for adults and another for children. The children's curriculum could also be broken down according to various age groups.

All law enforcement officers at any level should make sure that close family members are aware of the importance of personal safety issues. These can include information that is shared with the public. The officer should also see that close family members are aware of special personal safety concerns as they relate to being a family member of a law enforcement officer. Next month, we will address family member training that deals with important topics that go beyond personal safety.

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