

Standing Down

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In the mid to late 1990's, my tenure in Dallas SWAT and the Dallas Police department was rapidly coming to a close. Like most special operations (*law enforcement and military*) people, I had inadvertently abused my body beyond levels of healing or repair. Along with reoccurring bouts with PTSD and malaria (both that I had picked up in the military); I had permanent shoulder, back and hip damage. I had also suffered several brutal injuries that required dozens of surgeries. After each operation, I found myself recovering much slower than the previous surgery; so slowly, in fact, that in reality I was not recovering at all.

Sound familiar? For many of you, my story in the above paragraph is similar to your own - perhaps you do not have the *same* specific injuries (or diseases) as I, but you have injuries nevertheless. Or maybe you have no injuries, but age is taking away your capability to stay in the fight. Your reflexes are slowing; your vision is declining, and your ability to run with the pack keeps getting more and more difficult. The sad paradox is that no matter how much harder you train, how many extra miles you run, or how many additional range hours you put in – *nothing will stop the inevitable*. Don't get me wrong, your extra labors **will** delay things; however, it will not stop what is happening. The point that I am trying to make here is that we all come to this moment either through injuries, mental fatigue or by the natural passing of time – sometimes all three at once. Eventually, regardless of your heroic efforts, your dedication, or the absolute Warrior spirit that drives you, you are going to have to stand down.

If you are young and still consider yourself immortal, print this article, fold it up and put in your wall-locker. You will need it in about 20 years or after you have run a few hundred tactical missions; or worse, after you have received a career ending injury. For those that are currently facing this very personal dilemma, please read on. Maybe – in a small way – I can help you with this decision.

A. Refusing to recognize when it's time.

Though it might feel that way when making the decision, very few tactical officers choose to stand down under life threatening or the dramatic circumstances as found in the following paragraph. Still, there are enough SWAT guys out there that are playing this dangerous game that it necessitates discussion. To drive home the lessons here, I am going to use the stories of officers (that I personally know) that did not leave SWAT when they should have – which, as luck would have it, includes me.

My story

Circa 1994: For most of my adult life, I was passionate about Special Operations. Military or law enforcement – it didn't matter because I had done both and loved both equally. Now, at the ripe old age of 38, I sat on the edge of the bed staring at the puss and blood that was slowly seeping from my grossly swollen left knee. It was 3am and my pager had just gone off waking me from a fitful sleep. The number "45" was highlighted on the pagers LCD telling me that we had a tactical situation at some obscure address in south Dallas. Taking a deep breath against the pain, I began wrapping an Ace bandage - stored conveniently next to my bed - around the knee. I was racked with fever and in too much agony to move, let alone answer the summons; still, I had my duty to perform so I kept wrapping the leg as tightly as I could stand it. I knew that it

wouldn't be smart to show up at a critical incident with my pants leg wet with blood and puss (at the scene I would put on a knee pad to further hide the stains as I had done many times before). As I reached for my uniform and began to dress, the pager went off a second time telling me to discard the call out. With both relief and sadness, I sat back down on the bed and put my head in my hands. It was at that very moment I realized my days as a tactical operator were over.

After reading the above paragraph, you're probably asking yourself "what kind of moron are you?" I hate trick questions like that; but the truth of the matter is, I am not entirely sure why I allowed myself – other than my Warriors pride – to act in such a manner.

Thinking about my own experiences with this issue, I have come to realize that one of the most difficult things we face as Warriors is to put what is happening to us into perspective *as it is happening to us*. We keep making mistakes in our outlook about ourselves, our own degrading skill levels and in our attitude toward the needs of our team mates when they face the same concerns. What are those mistakes? Here are the five most common ones I have practiced and encountered:

1. We are rarely supportive of one another when a team mate is injured, aging or just flat out tired.

“MW”

MW is a veteran tactical officer of nearly 20 years. Based on my own personal knowledge, I knew that he was a well known, well liked, and highly respected tactical officer in the north Texas region. On a late night narcotics raid, he severely injured his back. Following a major reconstructive surgery, MW was in the hospital for two weeks and at home on bed rest and in therapy for another three months. During that entire time frame, none of his team mates called or came by to visit – not even his team leader. In his own words: "It was like my buddies couldn't be bothered with me." When I asked MW's team leader why they hadn't called or visited him, he shrugged and embarrassingly replied "MW is a great guy; I don't know. I guess we all just got too busy."

In light of how MW was treated (and how I have seen other officers treated in like circumstances), I believe that our actions and conduct are born out of fear, not malice or apathy. We see ourselves when we look at an injured, aging or beaten down comrade and it makes us afraid. Why? Because we know that in SWAT there are three kinds of operators; those that are, those that have been and those that will be – it is just a matter of time before your number comes up. Given this fear, rather than supporting and reaching out to a team mate (ironically someone that a few short days ago you would have taken a bullet for), it is easier to ignore what is happening than it is to acknowledge it. So, how does this keep us from standing down when it is our time? In SWAT we have found camaraderie, self identity, a challenge and a mission that thrills our Warrior spirit. No person wants to be cut off from that which they know and love.

*** Due to his injury, MW transferred out of SWAT and, to this day, trains in hopes of eventually returning to that life, though with a different team.

2. We use inaccurate methods such as physical fitness scores to deny our declining capabilities.

“DB”

Recently I had the “time to stand down talk” with a good friend and fellow Marine turned cop. Like me, DB had been a door kicker since his teenage years. During his entire Marine Corp and SWAT career, DB had led the team/squad in all things physical. When he came to me as a SWAT student, he made my life as a tactical instructor easy. Already well trained from the Corp, all I needed to do was put the polish on his “SWAT” skills and point him in the right direction – no further instructions needed. Over the years, DB went from entry team to tactical scout. For those that have never been a tactical scout, it is one of the most physically and mentally demanding positions in SWAT. Every mission he deployed on was completed with dedication, thoroughness, and always in a timely manner when the gathered tactical intelligence was needed. Then injuries and age came to visit and DB began to slow up and worse (in his own mind because he caught himself doing it), he began to take an occasional short cut. That seems like a minor sin in the scheme of things; however, DB admitted that he was doing it more and more often. One thing that I would like you to fully understand was that DB had not suddenly grown lazy. The problem was an accumulative effect of life (and injuries) - point being, though he could still run like the wind and soar through the physical fitness test, DB simply could no longer perform to SWAT standards when it came to the real thing.

I am a firm believer in physical fitness requirements for all *SWAT teams*. Tactical officers must be in good physical condition at all times. Therefore, tactical teams and/or individual team members must be periodically tested to assure compliance to standards. Unfortunately, while this particular standard is critical, if used incorrectly (as a sole means of evaluation for suitability to be SWAT) it can give us a false sense of reality. Here’s how:

In the chart below, a 40 to 49 year old (male) must run a 1.5 mile in 9:02 to 9:47 to be rated superior (or rated in the upper 95 to 99 percentile of people tested when this diagram was developed) for his age group. If our 40 to 49 year old performs equally as well on the rest of the Cooper’s Test (push-ups, sit-ups, bench press, etc.) to me he rates somewhere up around the hero worship status!

**New Cooper Age and Gender Base Standards for Law Enforcement
Cardio respiratory Fitness Test (1.5 Mile Run) Male**

| Age | 20 - 29 | 30 - 39 | 40 - 49 | 50-59 | 60 - 69 | 70 - 79 | | |
|---------|---------|---------|---------|-------|---------|---------|-----|----------|
| Time(s) | 8:22 | 8:49 | 9:02 | 9:31 | 10:09 | 10:27 | 99% | Superior |
| | 9:10 | 9:31 | 9:47 | 10:27 | 11:20 | 12:25 | 95% | |

Unfortunately, no matter what kind of a physical specimen/anomaly our super-jock might be, he is still 40 to 49 years of age. In his 30’s, his reflexes began to slow, his vision acuity lessened dramatically, his need for rest increased and his ability to heal radically decreased. Now into his 40’s, he is much more vulnerable to new injuries, old injuries haunting him, high blood pressure, diabetes, stroke, low testosterone (laugh if you want, but testosterone is what drives us), allergies, weight gain, mental fatigue and loss of hearing. And that my friend’s is the short list of the aging game!

So, how does this give us a false sense of reality? DB fell deeply into this trap; simply put, we view our impressive physical fitness scores **as a complete reality instead of only part of the picture**. Because of those scores, we think that we still have the ability of a much younger person, when in fact, we (those of us that are in our 40's to 50's) are suffering from aging – no matter what our physical fitness scores might be (sorry guys), we're only mortal.

*** DB has stood down from being an active door kicker and/or SWAT scout. Though he is still on the team, he now acts as position filler when the team runs short and as the team equipment man.

3. We allow ourselves to fall into the martyr syndrome.

“LJ”

LJ is a multi jurisdictional tactical commander on the Texas coast. He has been that regions SWAT commander since the team's inception some 13 years ago. LJ is a very likeable, highly intelligent and resourceful tactical leader; he is also perpetually short tempered, easily frustrated and often forgetful due to severe unceasing sleep deprivation. I first met LJ when he attended my Basic SWAT School back in '98. At the time, LJ was a newly promoted Lieutenant that had been tasked with forming a multi jurisdictional team for his county. For the first six years, LJ was on fire for SWAT – there was no mission, no team training, and no tactical school that the man would not embrace! And then, LJ transferred to deep nights and things began to change. With the responsibilities of a deep night shift supervisor and SWAT, LJ also has four young girls and a working wife. When LJ should be sleeping he isn't due to departmental meetings, SWAT call outs/training or, more importantly, family needs. **LJ has operated in a state of sleep deprivation for so long that he actually (erroneously and dangerously so) believes that he is just fine.** LJ calls me about once a month to vent about how bad things are at work and at home (mostly about what he is missing in the lives of his children). Without fail, he is exhausted, angry, frustrated and complaining that he should “just quit SWAT.” When I have asked him why he doesn't leave SWAT, without fail, he rattles off with: “No one wants this damn job; besides, I am the only one with the training – who else can do it?”

LJ is just one of many team leader/team commanders that I know of that has fallen into this syndrome. It seems the higher in rank (or command) a person goes, the more self-important that person becomes. The mistaken belief that you are the only person that can lead your team is delusional. It is also borderline criminally negligent because in such a mental state (fatigued, distracted, angry, frustrated, etc.) a commander can and will error in judgment – it is just a matter of time. There is no reason to martyr yourself if you have mentored your team's subordinate leadership as you are supposed do to. In other words, if you have done your job well – you can be replaced (or relieved and given rest) by those you have trained. There is one final point here that I need to mention; the situation with LJ has gone on for so long it has become chronic. Only long term medical intervention can help reboot his mental and physical state.

*** LJ was recently ordered to stand down – under extreme protest he has complied with that order. I am more than sure that I have lost a long standing friendship with LJ because it was my recommendation (as a paid consultant) that encouraged the Sheriff to issue that order.

4. We compare our injuries and recovery (or that of a team mate) to the injuries professional athletes suffer.

“JC”

JC joined his SWAT team in 2008. He is young, strong and very energetic. As of July 1st 2010, he was declared permanently disabled and assigned to light duty jobs only. His law enforcement career is in danger and he is facing financial ruin. JC's story is like that of so many SWAT officers; he was hurt while training and refused to stand down or give the injury (a severely blown-out knee) time to heal. Against the doctor's explicit orders to quit SWAT, JC was out trying to jog when he tripped and tore loose the ligament graphs, busted out the screws and fractured the distal end of the femur. Short of a total knee replacement, the damage is almost beyond repair! JC is a smart kid, so why did he do something so dumb? Because his team leader had pulled him aside and told him to get back to full duty or lose his in position in SWAT.

JC's team leader reminds me of a stereotypical High School football coach that clings to the old cliché that playing with pain builds character. For the most part, this mindset comes from watching professional sports on TV. The team leader has seen pro athletes get injured and return to competition in a matter of weeks; he then rationalizes that an injured SWAT officer should be able to do the same. The fallacy of this comparison is that the team leader (and to some extent nearly every SWAT officer I know) fails to comprehend the following critical points:

- Professional athletes have the finest medical attention money can buy. Surgeries and rehabilitation are done in the very best facilities and the athlete wants for nothing.
- When injured, the professional athlete is given time, medications and treatment that will expedite healing. Team owners, coaches and trainers all understand that if injured, their prized athlete will not perform well. In law enforcement, we do not have this logical understanding. Often, our recovery from injury is based on an arbitrary time table mandated by city/county/state policies. The bottom line is that many government command entities do not consider us as valuable well trained assets; only as expendable pieces of equipment that should be tossed aside when damaged.
- Professional athletes have no other concerns but to heal. In law enforcement we are overwhelmed with issues (i.e. fear of losing our job or team position) that quickly becomes detrimental to healing by forcing us to return to full duty long before we should. Arguably, a pro athlete might also lose a starting position or be forced into retirement; however, with a ten or twenty million dollar insurance policy backing him up, there is no prospect of financial ruin.
- Professional athletes have the “post season” to rest. In SWAT we are expected to be on our game 24/7, three hundred and sixty five days a year. In short: we have no “Off Season.”

In SWAT there is no way to avoid injuries – running, jumping, climbing and fighting bad guys while wearing over 50 pounds of equipment takes its toll on the human body. Whether you realize it or not, halfway healed injuries or even simple injuries like a pulled muscle or a strained back will become permanent without rest and with continued abuse. Having learned this lesson the hard way, let me suggest a good way to measure

where you are at with injuries and standing down. Ask yourself these three questions: Do you want to be able to run when you are older? Do you want to be able to wrestle or play ball with your kids or grandkids? Do you want to permanently live on pain killers and anti-inflammatory medications? If you do not care about these questions then please drive on; however, if you are now injured and if any one of these questions truly bothers you, then you need to be smart or at least smarter than I was.

*** Last January JC had his knee replaced and returned to full (but limited) duty. He now acts as the team equipment man and assists in team training.

5. No matter the injury, the pain, the age or the fatigue - we stay passionate in our Warrior's spirit.

“WS”

WS was a founding member of his central Texas team. Starting as a very talented door kicker, WS eventually worked his way up to team leader. Dynamic in his leadership skills, WS simply had a knack for leading tactical operations. Of all the team leaders and door kickers that I have trained and mentored, WS was by far one of my prized students. During his third (or fourth) year as team leader, WS's family suffered several personal tragedies almost back to back. As each tragedy occurred, I watched as my good friend became more and more distracted, unfocused; and visibly (but rightfully so) depressed. While he never actually became ineffective as a team leader, it was a close thing. It took WS about a year to finally stand down. It hurts to say this; but that was probably a year too long. Why did WS stay with SWAT when he knew that he was having problems? I believe it is because WS's Warrior spirit is so strong it drove him to not let go.

While I can relate to all the stories I have discussed, I find WS's story the one I understand best. Like WS, I too embraced the Warrior spirit at a very young age. It is this spirit that, in the worst of times, saved my life and kept me fighting – even when the cause was lost. It is so ingrained in my personality (as it is in yours), that even when it became detrimental to me, like WS, I could not see it.

*** As previously noted, WS left the team and is now a patrol supervisor. After he stood down, WS was ostracized by many of his team mates – especially his former team commander, who seemed to take WS standing down as a personal betrayal. After a several years and a few major sit-down-talks with team members, WS is now recognized as a valuable training resource.

B. Recognizing when it's time to let go.

In the above 5 illustrations, I've told you about situations and circumstances that involved tactical officers who, for whatever reason, refused to let go of their SWAT career when it was time. Each of those officers (and their stories) had, to some degree or another, warning signs well in advance that they should have paid attention to. Below I have listed – as a summation – warning signs that should be setting off bells, whistles and little voices in your head if they are occurring in your life.

- You injure quickly and easily, the injuries are not healing and/or the injury keeps coming back: I'll not beat a dead horse on this point except to say that you need to listen to your body.

- Doctor's have recommended that you leave SWAT due to an injury: As cops, we roll our eyes when a civilian tells us that "they know the law" and that we are wrong in what we are doing or telling them. Traditionally, doctors in the U.S. can have up to ten years of training before they are cut completely loose to practice medicine. My point is that we tend to think that we know better than the doctors (with all their education, experience and training) about our bodies. Remember this when it comes to a diagnosis that you do not like: The doctors have your best interest in mind; but you may not!
- Pain: Minor pain or discomfort as a result of a bruise, bump or collision is nothing but an inconsequential distracter. In those cases a SWAT officer must Cowboy-up and fight through the pain. Even significant pain can and should be overcome by a SWAT officer if the circumstances make it necessary. The key words in the previous sentence are "circumstances" and "necessary." If neither of those words are a part of the equation (and you are refusing to tend to the severe pain with medical assistance), you are setting yourself up for eventual failure. Worse still, because you cannot function at 100% tactical due to the pain, you are endangering your team mates and innocent civilians.
- Chronic weariness: You are physically and mentally worn out. People often associate this with a lack of rest and, to some extent; they do go hand in hand. However, this can also be a complete separate issue. For instance, I recently spoke to a 15 year SWAT officer that had been feeling horribly worn out. He felt that he had no focus when training or when deployed, that everything little thing was "ticking him off" and that he was constantly frustrated and angry when called out for tactical duties. That's all mental. Physically, he said that whenever he worked out, trained or deployed "it's like someone pulled the plug" – meaning he had no energy. I went through (as Dear Abby in a jock-strap) the standard list of questions I know to ask: How are you sleeping? Fine. Eating? Fine. Home life? Fine. Finances? Fine. Vacations? Fine. In fact he had just gotten back from long one. Ding!!!! So what was the problem? Quoting Sherlock Holmes (paraphrased) "after you remove the obvious, whatever is left is the answer." In this case what was left was SWAT. No matter how much he loved SWAT – he was tired of it. One thing that we A-types always seem to forget is that everything in life (including life) has an expiration date assigned to it.
- Family problems: In law enforcement our divorce rate is high. In SWAT it is dismal. At some point in time family problems will reach critical mass – when that happens the situation cannot be saved. My question to you is this: Is there anything more important than your family?

Conclusion:

One thing that I want to make abundantly clear is that my foolishness cost me a terrible price. Not only was my leg taken; but I was financially ruined, humbled and even humiliated. Even with all that in mind, I have not at any point in this article told you to quit SWAT, only to be smarter than I was about the decision. The word "quit" is not in our A-type personality vocabulary. So, you wouldn't listen to me even if I recommended it. When considering the end of your SWAT career, there are some closing points that I want you to lock on to, these are:

- Remember who and what you are – you are SWAT! Standing down does not take that away from you.

- What follows your SWAT career is important. Embrace it with the same Warrior spirit that you did with SWAT.
- Lesser men write books about what you have done – take pride in that.
- By teaching and mentoring younger officers, you have created a legacy for yourself. And in that, your Warrior spirit shall live on.
- The end of a distinguished tactical career should never be considered a defeat. It is a victory. You have served honorably and you have served well.
- If you are soon to be facing this decision, but you are not quite there yet; be like a super nova – burn brightest at the end!

“Far better is it to dare mighty things, to win glorious triumphs, even though checkered by failure... than to rank with those poor spirits who neither enjoy nor suffer much, because they live in a gray twilight that knows not victory nor defeat.”

Theodore Roosevelt



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The son of a career military officer, Mike spent 12 years on active duty as a noncommissioned and commissioned officer (mostly carrying a rifle, rubber boat, and dive equipment running up and down the beaches of sunny California). While in the military, Mike served in the Marine Corps elite Force Reconnaissance teams and then later as a commissioned officer in the U.S. Army Infantry and Military Police Corps. In 1988, after numerous deployments around the world, Mike left the military as a Captain and joined the Dallas Police Department. During his tenure with Dallas, Mike earned 48 written commendations, 2 life saving awards, 1 police commendation bar (for valor), 2 Certificates of Merit (for valor) and the Medal for Valor (43rd Recipient). Mike served as a patrolman in south Dallas, auto theft Investigator and as a member of a Tactical team (SWAT). Published in his field, Mike has written numerous articles for law enforcement magazines and has published eight tactical training manuals. Mikes career with Dallas ended after a severe line of duty injury forced him into early retirement. This injury eventually led the amputation of his left leg above the knee. Currently, Mike is co-owner of Charlie-Mike Enterprises, Inc. Charlie-Mike Enterprises, Inc. specializes in teaching courses such as, but not limited to; Active Shooter / Immediate Response (AS/IR), Hazardous Warrant / Apprehensions, Basic and Advanced SWAT, Basic and Advanced Police Rifle, Hostage Rescue, and Counter Paramilitary Operations. Through Charlie-Mike Enterprises, Inc. Mike has also been contracted as a consultant to review and assist in upgrading security at Independent School Districts and private corporations. Since its inception in 1998, Charlie-Mike Enterprises, Inc. has taught over 1500 officers from as many as 225 agencies. Mike can be contacted at (972) 291-7809 or at CMESWAT@aol.com. Website www.CMESWAT.com