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Virtual police work

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Cpl. Curtis Parker of the RCMP Training Academy Depot Division in Regina demonstrates the virtual firing range. Colin Dewar photograph

RCMP Cpl. Dave Elms switches on his flashlight and walks through a city park in the dark.

He's responding to a call about a woman with a knife threatening people and asking them for money. Elms' partner is already on the scene and trying to reason with the woman.

"Partner, what's going on here?" asks Elms.

"She won't move away from the knife," he responds.

Suddenly, the woman — who is sitting on a blanket — picks up the knife and starts waving it around.

Elms pulls out his pepper spray, aims it at the woman's face and his partner rushes in to arrest her.

There's clapping and the lights come on around Elms. He's just successfully completed a training scenario using a new, state-of-the-art, use-of-force simulator at the RCMP cadet training centre in Regina.

"We want to make sure our cadets are fully prepared to respond to calls immediately after graduation," said Depot division's Chief Superintendent Bob Smart.

"We're trying to adapt our training to scenarios faced in modern-day situations."

The use-of-force simulator — a giant movie screen with images and outcomes controlled by an instructor at a computer — is one of three new video trainers purchased by Depot division as part of a joint research project with the Canadian Police Research Centre.

The equipment comes from Australia, France, Canada and the United States and costs about \$1.3 million.

In addition to the use-of-force simulator, there's also a driving simulator and a virtual pistol shooting range.

The driving simulator is based on a 2007 Ford Crown Victoria Interceptor, the standard RCMP vehicle.

It has five screens to show a 360-degree view outside the car and gauges inside, as well as a reactive seat belt and working radio, lights and siren.

"It's designed to enhance decision-making and to teach the cadets to make appropriate decisions while driving," said Cpl. Ryan Currie.

Driving scenarios are controlled by an instructor at a computer and real-time video — taken during the exercise — is reviewed with cadets when the exercise is over.

The eight driving simulators cost \$100,000 each and have been at Depot division for two months.

"We're trying to figure out how to build our lesson plans to fit them into the curriculum," said Currie, adding simulators are not yet being used by cadets. "We're hoping to do that by next year."

The virtual shooting range has computerized targets that respond to input from real Smith & Wesson pistols that fire laser beams instead of bullets.

Its purpose is to enhance shooting practice and familiarize cadets with shooting before heading to a live-fire range.

Air munitions pistols — which also fire laser beams — can be used at the virtual range as well.

They are more realistic than the other guns because they have a magazine of compressed air pellets that provide recoil similar to that of a regular pistol.

“It helps them get over any intimidation they may have,” said Dr. Garry Bell. “Especially for cadets who have never fired a pistol before.”

The virtual range has been in place for five months.

About 450 cadets enrolled in the RCMP academy this year have used it as a lead-in to live-fire training.

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30/05/08



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