

Have gun, will report

BY JAMES MENNIE, THE GAZETTE APRIL 3, 2009



Gazette reporter James Mennie takes aim during virtual shootout at police training facility.

Photograph by: Allen McInnis, The Gazette

“How many times did you shoot?”

The last time I pulled a trigger I was six years old, staring down the barrel of my Colt Buntline Special replica cap-gun while ridding my parents’ backyard of Wild West outlaws, Nazis and sundry other undesirables.

But right now I’m a lot older, holding a Walther P990 semi-automatic pistol that’s been modified to fire bursts of laser energy instead of 9 mm bullets, my leg still hurts from where I was “shot” five minutes earlier and Hugo Tousignant of the Montreal police department’s training division doesn’t sound impressed.

“Four,” I reply as the ringing in my ears starts to fade, “I fired four times.”

“Actually,” says Tousignant coolly, reviewing the shooting simulator control console as he sits behind me and the virtual courtroom I’ve just shot to pieces, “you fired five times.”

They had made me sit in a chair and hold a file folder on my lap. Tousignant told me that I was a police officer in a courtroom, waiting my turn to testify as a witness. The wall-sized screen in front of me lit up and there I was, watching another witness on the stand while the accused, sitting about three courtroom benches in front of me, muttered to his lawyer that it was all lies.

Within seconds, the accused’s voice had so risen that the sheriff standing next to him (the simulator is made in Washington state, and its 500 scenarios not only take place in English but in an American context), leaned over to quiet him down.

My attention was drawn to the conversation in front of me, but since the last simulation I played ended with my being shot because I was distracted, my heart began to thump as I began to calculate how long it would take to draw my weapon.

I got my answer a second later, when an otherwise unremarkable spectator sitting at the far end of the courtroom suddenly stood up, pulled a pistol and opened fire toward the witness box.

Somewhere in the first volley of gunfire, I crouched down and took cover behind the short sheet of plywood to my left that was my only protection during this exercise. I kept my eyes on the gunman, lining up the sight of my pistol as the hard, marble-sized nylon balls launched from a pneumatic cannon over the screen clattered and rolled around the floor, the simulator's version of returned fire.

There were people screaming, panicking, getting between me and the shooter, who was now pointing his gun at me. I shot, then shot again and nothing happened. Then he walked toward me, his pistol extended. I shot again and slowly, somewhat mechanically, he tumbled forward between the courtroom benches.

I stood up, my heart pounding, my pistol still pointed, to see a virtual courtroom spectator looking right at me, his hands up, telling me not to shoot.

It felt like the simulation lasted for about three minutes. I'd learn later the entire incident took 19 seconds.

"When I asked you if there was anyone between you and the shooter, you said 'no'," says Tousignant, debriefing me with frame by frame analysis of the courtroom shooting. "You'll notice there are two people crouched down on the bench between you and him."

The other thing I notice, highlighted in bright red dots, is where my shots ended up.

One in a wall, another in a filing cabinet, a third through a window. Another, Tousignant tells me, struck one of the two bystanders cowering between me and the shooter (although, for the record, I still maintain I only grazed her ponytail). The shot that brought down the shooter struck him in the left temple.

It looked impressive, in a macabre kind of way, until you realize that I had aimed that "bullet," like every other, at the shooter's chest.

The PRISim simulator is manufactured by Seattle-based Advanced Interactive Systems (AIS), a firm that also produces conventional shooting range simulators for police departments and the military.

In 2007, the Montreal executive committee approved the purchase of four of the devices for almost \$70,000 each. Thus far, two have been installed, one of them housed in the ramshackle building located along Metropolitan Blvd. where Tousignant and other instructors teach fellow officers everything from proper use of a police baton to how to break through a door.

Montreal's 4,500 police are expected to spend at least one session annually in front of the PRISim, and the department's training section has already produced nearly 20 videos of their own for the simulator,

shot at local venues like métro stations and in French.

Some scenarios end peacefully, almost deflatingly so, as apparently aggressive suspects obey a command to throw down their weapon and submit to arrest. But others – my courtroom shootout among them – are deliberately designed to inflict massive stress in a short period of time.

Nor is that stress coming only from the simulator screen. Police officers who go through the exercise do so while fellow officers watch then take part in the debriefing. The choice of such an audience is deliberate, the rationale being that while it's stressful to be shot at, it can be even more so when you have to react to that gunfire in front of your peers.

"The two greatest fears we have," says Tousignant, "Are the fear of death, and the fear of a loss of self-esteem."

While Montreal police refer to the device as a shooting simulator, AIS refers to it on its website as a "video-based judgment training simulator."

Given that my lack of judgment in an earlier simulation saw me take a pellet in the leg, the company's description seems more apt. That scenario called for me to investigate a suspected drug deal. When I materialized on the scene I saw three suspects – two of them female – standing in front of a car. Almost immediately, the male suspect began to berate me and, more dangerously, distract me from the two women beside him. It was the woman on the left who pulled a revolver and shot me. She fled, giving the male suspect time to reach into the car and pull out a machine gun. He shot at me, missed and, finally, obeyed my order to drop the weapon.

That lesson in paying attention was backed up by the sting in my right leg. But the lesson that remains burned in my memory is the debriefing that followed it with Tousignant. Despite the fact I've made my living for more than 20 years observing what happens around me. I could remember almost nothing about the details of the first scenario – not even being shot.

"It's tunnel vision," one of the instructors told me afterwards. "Our attention focuses on the threat in front of us and nothing else. ... It happens to everybody."

"You see," says François Houle, who gives police courses on the use of force, as we watch a video of my reaction to the courtroom shooting, "that this time, when the shooting started, you took cover.

"Already, in a short period of time, you've learned from your experience."

Learning from experience – particularly in the area of the use of force – is something the Montreal police department has been doing for more than 20 years.

A series of high profile inquiries into controversial police operations that resulted in the loss of human life have resulted in a series of training reforms, reforms that include the purchase of such high-tech aids as the PRISim.

The latest such inquiry is scheduled to take place later this year and will look into the fatal shooting last August of Fredy Villanueva by Montreal police. The unarmed 18-year-old was shot along with two

friends during a failed attempt by two uniformed police officers to arrest his brother. The inquiry will likely examine the second-by-second decisions made by the officers before the shots were fired, perhaps even establish whether they had received any training time on the simulator. But it's even more likely it will look at what happened before the guns were drawn, at what plan, if any, the officers had before getting out of their squad car.

Despite the size of its screen, the PRISim isn't quite so big-picture. If it teaches anything resembling a lesson, it's that there are no absolutely "right" split-second decisions, only decisions which, given a particular set of circumstances, might be less wrong than others.

And that lack of absolutes is illustrated by the third simulation I'm shown, not as a participant, but as a spectator.

The set-up is that a citizen has called police to say the woman who lives in the condo next door is calling for help. When you answer the call, you enter a darkened home that appears normal on the ground floor until you notice an overturned chair at the base of the stairs, then a shoe on one of the steps.

You hear sounds of pain, a woman's voice, coming from behind a half-open door. As you open the door, you see the woman pinned on the bed by a man armed with a knife.

The attacker sees the police, jumps up suddenly, drops the knife in surrender. But his victim then reaches under her pillow and produces a pistol, pointing it at her attacker.

"You saw how quickly a pistol can fire in the courtroom," shooting instructor Stéphane Mathurin tells me, the images on the screen now frozen, "She can shoot him in a fraction of a second. What do you do?"

"If she kills the guy, you'll be blamed for not doing anything. If you shoot her, you'll be blamed for shooting a victim who was trying to defend herself."

Mathurin and Houle say this kind of no-win scenario is used to stimulate discussion and point out the importance of having some kind of a plan before answering a call where physical danger might occur.

In the end I never answered Mathurin's question about what I would have done. All I know is that I'm glad I was able to watch that last simulation from the sidelines and not with the Walther in my hand.

Because I'm still not sure what I'd have done if she'd pointed that pistol at me.

And I don't think I ever will be.

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