

Virtual reality

By Joel Metzger

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Shots rang out at the Calaveras County Airport last week as Calaveras Sheriff's Office members took part in a Force Options Simulator under the watchful eyes of two instructors from the Modesto Police Department.

Groups of trainees spent an hour reviewing the use of force and case law before entering a specialized mobile training unit and taking part in force simulations.

Two Modesto Police Department officers hauled a bulletproof sound-shielded trailer up to the airport and, after the briefing, trainees took part in three (of more than 1,000) five-minute video scenarios inside the mobile unit.

Every member of the Sheriff's Office, from the rank of sergeant on down, participated in the training over the three-day period that started Tuesday. The training was optional for administration.

An elevated control booth is at the front of the trailer and was occupied by Officer John Sanchez, Modesto Police Department Force Options Simulator instructor, who decided what simulation each participant faced. Trainees stood near the center of the trailer behind a barrier and faced a large screen at the back on which a scenario was projected.

Once the simulation begins, the entire trailer goes black until the projection begins. Deputies react to what they see on the screen as though it were real life. If the situation warrants force, firearms, Tasers or pepper spray may be fired at the virtual targets.

In last week's training, only firearms were used. If a trainee felt that a Taser or pepper spray was necessary he or she would tell the range master and the scenario would react accordingly.

The software allows Sanchez to change the scenario based on how the trainee reacts. Some situations can be defused without any use of force, Sanchez said.

"The training is invaluable," said Tim Sturm, sergeant of special operations for the Calaveras Sheriff's Office. "You don't get that type of training at the range when shooting at a static target." Trainees carry their own weapons and are provided with special frangible rounds, which are designed to disintegrate on contact and are non-penetrating.

"You use your own firearm," Sturm said. "The situation is very realistic. Even more realistic is the decision to shoot or not shoot, or use of Taser or pepper spray."



Joe Pimentel, left, and John Sanchez stand in front of the Force Options Simulator, in which they train law enforcement officers. Enterprise photo by Joel Metzger



Pimentel discusses a scenario with

There is a shield behind the screen that stops the bullets and the entire interior of the trailer is lined with sound-absorbing panels.

“We have two laser sensors in the left-hand and right-hand corner going down over the screen,” Sanchez said. “When the round penetrates these sensors, it will record on the computer, showing where the bullets hit. You can see accuracy.”



a member of the Calaveras Sheriff's Office. Enterprise photo by Joel Metzger

Once a weapon is fired, the scenario soon comes to a stop and an instant replay is projected on the screen. The trainee is told how fast he or she reacted to the threat in tenths of seconds. Red dots then appear where every bullet struck the threat on the screen. This allows the trainee's accuracy to be identified.

John Sanchez, Modesto Police Department Force Options Simulator instructor, mans the control booth during a simulated self-defense scenario used to train law enforcement in making quick decisions. Enterprise photo by Joel Metzger

“After using the weapon, the scenario completes,” Sturm said. “The computer backs up and first of all tells you the amount of time it took from when you recognized the threat until you fired your first shot. It measures that amount of time in tenths of seconds. Then it shows the shot placement.”

In his most recent training exercise, Sturm fired his weapon three-tenths of a second after the computer perceived the threat and struck his target in the chest.

“The training typically instructs us to aim for center mass,” Sturm said. “The emphasis is to stop the threat. You use the amount of force necessary.”

Immediately following the replay, Officer Joe Pimentel, Modesto Police Department Force Options Simulator instructor range master, asks the trainee for a detailed account of what just occurred. “They say, 'What did you see?'" Sturm said. “You explain what you saw right up to the little details. You identify what you asked the suspect to do. Essentially, you act as if you're giving a narrative to a report. They provide you with some of their feedback.”

“We apply this training to Peace Officer Standards and Training,” Sturm said, which requires that each peace officer have set amount of continuing education each year.

Sturm said the sheriff's office hopes to have the mobile Force Options Simulator back in the future. *Contact Joel Metzger at jmetzger@calaverasenterprise.com.*

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