



# NRA LAW ENFORCEMENT QUARTERLY

## The “Kasal Standard” for Gun Handling Skills

BY SGT. MARK SCHRAER

In November 2004, First Sergeant Bradley Kasal was leading a patrol of Marines through a neighborhood in Fallujah. After hearing that fellow Marines were pinned down inside a house, Kasal and other members of his team entered the building. In the subsequent fight, Kasal was hit multiple times by rounds from an insurgent's AK-47, and sustained dozens of fragmentation wounds as he used his body to shield a fellow Marine from an exploding grenade.

Kasal was eventually helped from the house by Lance Corporals Chris Marquez and Dan Shaffer. Marquez and Shaffer selflessly doffed their own rifles in order to extract Kasal as quickly as possible. Noticing that Shaffer and Marquez were unarmed, Kasal drew his pistol in case the three encountered more enemy combatants on the way out.

A now famous photograph captured the moment that a wounded Kasal was helped from the house. Although he sustained wounds that caused him to lose 60% of his blood, and which would require multiple operations and a two year recovery, Kasal maintained proper trigger finger placement and muzzle discipline as they exited.

Kasal's example of proper firearms handling is little more than a side note to his heroic actions that day in Fallujah – heroism for which he was awarded the Navy Cross. However, his ability to safely deploy his pistol, while grievously wounded, should serve as the standard for both law enforcement instructors, and the officers we train.



**Lance Corporals Chris Marquez and Dan Shaffer help extract the wounded First Sergeant Bradley Kasal from a house in Fallujah. Even in a crisis, safety must be a priority.**

### **We have a serious problem**

Unfortunately, the law enforcement profession is not living up to Kasal's standard. Instead, we're seeing too many examples of good men and women being injured or killed by officers who ignore essential firearms/range safety protocols.

Since late 2011, almost a dozen law enforcement officers have been negligently killed in training incidents. Care-

less officers have fatally shot themselves and other officers. On more than one occasion during this period, firearms instructors – those most responsible for the safe conduct of training – have fatally shot their own students.

Sadly, it seems that hardly a month goes by that we don't learn of officers negligently hurting themselves, their partners, or a member of the public in these firearms “accidents”.

*Continued on page 2*



*Continued from page 1*

## **Tips from the First Sergeant**

For the past decade, I have praised Kasal's example in the classes I teach. I briefly describe Kasal's battle and then show the photo of him exiting the house with his finger safely in register on the pistol frame, with the muzzle pointed in the safest direction available to him. Against this backdrop, I make it absolutely clear that if Kasal was able to maintain proper finger placement and muzzle discipline during his fight, I cannot accept anything less than this standard in the relative calm of the training.

After mentioning Kasal's example for so many years, I decided to reach out to Sergeant Major (Retired) Kasal in 2016. Kasal was kind enough to discuss that day in Fallujah, and more specifically, answer my questions about his pistol-handling skills towards the end of his fight.

Sergeant Major Kasal's observations on training are important, and provide armed professionals – and their instructors – a lot to think about:

**Q** – Considering the stress of battle, and the extent of your injuries, how did you have the presence of mind to maintain proper trigger finger placement and muzzle discipline?

**A** – “I actually never thought about it. Years of repetitive training - that consistently stressed only the correct method to deploy my weapon - created the muscle memory to do what was right when it mattered most. When I needed to do everything correctly, even the so-called little things just happened the way they were supposed to”

**Q** – What advice would you offer law enforcement firearms instructors on how to impart safe gun handling skills to those they train?

**A** – “Regardless of rank, firearms instructors are leaders. They must understand their responsibility as leaders; and understand that there is a big difference between techniques that are close to right, and those which are absolutely correct. Regardless of whether it makes them popular, firearms instructors must have the personal strength to insist that officers only train the right way.”

“Whether shooting or handling a gun, correctly repeating the same skills - until they are completely natural - is the only standard that should be good enough. When we allow officers to do things close to right, we set them up for failure when they are faced with a fight like mine. Good enough should never be a standard, especially for the skills needed to save an officer's or teammate's life.”

**Q** – Are there any other thoughts that you would like to share with law enforcement trainers and the officers we teach?

**A** – “Instructors must never allow students to cut corners. But officers also have a responsibility to commit to training perfectly so that they develop perfect habits. From my first weeks in Parris Island, instructors stressed correct gun handling skills. I ingrained these habits to the point that years later, I didn't need to think about them when they mattered the most”

## **The way forward**

Negligent law enforcement shootings are completely preventable, and they need to stop. As a profession, we must strive to train every officer to nothing less than the standard demonstrated by Sergeant Major Kasal. We also need to impose greater accountability for those who fail to develop, and maintain, such a standard. Towards this effort, I encourage the following;

### **1. Move away from the typical safety brief**

Establishing your expectations for safe firearms handling requires more than reciting the Four Core Rules for Firearms Safety. Routine safety briefs should be replaced with well-prepared discussions about firearms safety – and your expectations of the class. These discussions should offer examples of how tragic training incidents were caused, and how similar tragedies can be prevented.

### **2. Strictly enforce safety standards**

We would all agree that there should be no “warm-up” session for safe gun handling skills. Officers should come to training with these skills already ingrained.

Yet far too often, well-intentioned instructors provide endless warnings to

students who fail to follow established standards safely. Some instructors want to avoid embarrassing the student, while others hope that these issues will “work themselves out” over the course of training.

Safety issues need to be addressed, not ignored. If these issues cannot be corrected immediately, the officer should be removed from live-fire training – embarrassment be damned – until they can demonstrate an unconscious command of safe gun handling skills.

### **3. Train officers to move in a 360-degree world**

As we are all aware, most law enforcement shootings occur in urban environments – i.e. the busy street, the occupied home, the crowded shopping center, etc. The realities of law enforcement shootings require us to provide officers with regular training on operating in a tactical environment.

Officers not only need to know how to react to a sudden threat, they need to know how to move in a way that lets them protect their weapons, and maneuver safely through crowds without needlessly endangering others.

## **Leading us away from these tragedies**

As Sergeant Major Kasal correctly stated, firearms instructors are leaders. As leaders, we have an obligation to ingrain both the shooting and gun handling skills that will serve our officers well – no matter the environment they are in, or level of stress they are faced with.

I encourage all instructors to take a fresh look at the expectations you and your agency set for the officers. I also encourage every instructor to set Sergeant Major Kasal's gun handling skills as the benchmark for those you train.

*Sergeant Mark Schraer served as a California Police Officer for 26 years, including 13 years as a operator/supervisor on his agency's SWAT Team. Mark was a defensive tactics instructor and also served as the agency's range master, leading a team of ten other instructors.*

*Since 2010, Mark has been a staff instructor for the NRA's Law Enforcement Division. He also serves as a regional firearms instructor for a major American security company.*

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# MORAL DUTY TO TRAIN

**BY RON FLOWERS**

We've given a lot of thought to this subject now that we are much more involved in the training of good citizens, rather than just police.

In the field of law enforcement, the legal "duty to train" is well established in case law, as directed in long standing examples such as *City of Canton v Harris*, *Popov v City of Margate*, *Zuchel v Denver* and others. The courts have long recognized that police agencies and the jurisdictions they serve have a duty to train their officers for the myriad of complex decisions officers will face in the performance of their duties.

However, the moral obligation to prepare the police for their duties is even more important, in our opinion, and it's time to apply that same imperative to the training of citizens who elect to take personal responsibility for their safety, the safety of their families and communities.

Some states require training before issuing a Concealed Carry Permit,

others do not require it but encourage responsible citizens to seek out competent instructors well versed in not only the technical use of firearms, but who are also well versed in the ramifications of the use of deadly force by a civilian defending themselves or their families in a lawful context.

Citizens should seek experienced and credible trainers with the above holistic attitude who teach with integrity.

The role of the citizen in defense of self and community was a part of our social and cultural fabric. The concept of the militia encompassed these responsibilities, and young people of previous generations absorbed these responsibilities and were trained in the technical skills to play their part by the adult men and women of their cities, towns and villages.

However, our culture has changed. In many parts of the country, that concept of personal responsibility is not passed on or is even discouraged. Thankfully, in many cases, that sense of responsibility is re-acquired as a

natural consequence of life changes, such as taking a spouse or the birth of a child. These changes result in men and women seeking professional instruction in the defensive use of firearms.

In addition, a complex and sometimes violent world causes individuals, as a result of a real and immediate fear triggered by a specific incident, or a reaction to high-profile acts of violence, to focus on personal responsibility for their safety and seek integrity-based training in the use of firearms, a skill that is not being passed on as it was earlier in our history.

The men and women who ponder these decisions, and then seek experienced mentors and trainers are, in our opinion, owed the best and most relevant training an instructor can provide, and they are owed it now.

Just like in law enforcement, where officers need relevant and realistic training as soon as they are able to absorb it, so do good men and women with real fears and circumstances need realistic training, relevant infor-

mation and context as soon as they are able to absorb it. And that training must address the spoken and unspoken reasons they have decided to own and possibly have to use a firearm.

These good and responsible people, fellow citizens, neighbors, friends, are all adults who have expectations when they seek and select instructors/mentors, and they should not be condescended to. Men and women, all of whom have lead professional lives or raised families, or have made a mark in the world in any number of ways, can and do rise to the occasion. Cookie-cutter instruction, analogous to teaching a child to draw block letters, does not serve them well.

Rather, trainers have a moral obligation to provide contextual technical training, the “why’s” that specific grips, stances, attitudes, and standards of accuracy matter. Holistic training that includes legal principles of the use of deadly force, such as how to interact with police in the aftermath, is critical. There is also a responsibility to warn students of the physiological effects the kind of extreme stress a defensive shooting engenders, the strong emotional lows that inevitably follow the extreme fear that caused them to pull the trigger on another human being.

Just as important, perhaps more so, instructors must address the necessary skills of situational awareness, the concept of conflict avoidance, and reducing the likelihood they will ever be perceived as an “easy victim.” Doing so will properly identify the defensive use of a firearm as a last resort.

Fortunately, the pendulum is starting to swing back in the direction necessary to achieve realistic, contextual and relevant training in the use of firearms by responsible civilians. Organizations such as the USCCA, the NRA’s Carry Guard, and others are slowly getting the important information out there, and the counter-insurgency conflicts we’ve been involved in since 9/11/2001 have resulted in a lot of highly skilled, experienced instructors hanging out their shingles and training their fellow citizens. There are

also a great number of experienced law enforcement trainers who have the total package of technical ability and contextual experience in the use of deadly force in our cultural and demographic context.

The key is to seek to instruction from a variety of sources, looking for the trainers who provide you real answers, have realistic and articulate responses to the “why” questions, and conduct themselves with a commitment to integrity. Experience in the relevant fields is a must, and an unselfish willingness to share with students all they can absorb, as well as making students aware of other, like minded instructors who also have integrity, are all characteristics of the kind of instructors’ responsible civilians should seek.

The moral duty to train good people to the most realistic level as possible is matched by the obligation responsible civilians have to seek out committed and professional men and women who can provide them what they need.

*Ron Flowers is a formerly Commissioned veteran of the US Navy (Reserves), the US Merchant Marine, and is a retired lieutenant of the Allentown (Pa) Police and former LEP (Law Enforcement Professional) contractor in Operation Enduring Freedom. Ron began training police in 1994 and owns Citizens Defense Training LLC ([www.citizensdt.com](http://www.citizensdt.com)) training vetted civilians, as well as providing training to small police departments with municipal police state training commission approved classes. He also serves the NRA Law Enforcement Division as an Adjunct Instructor for Police Firearms Instructor Development classes and can be reached at [ron.flowers@citizensdt.com](mailto:ron.flowers@citizensdt.com). Both he and his wife have a combined 2500 hours of training from some of America’s finest, and commit to being “students first” at several training events each year.*

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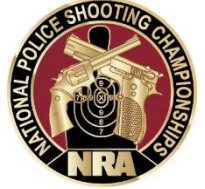
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Ron Peterson

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Pictured left to right: Glen Hoyer, Director of NRA Law Enforcement; Josh Dorsey, Vice President, Glock USA; Josh Perren, NRA Senior Advisor to the Executive Vice President

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