

VALOR

Spotlight on Safety

*Officer Safety, Wellness,
and Resiliency*

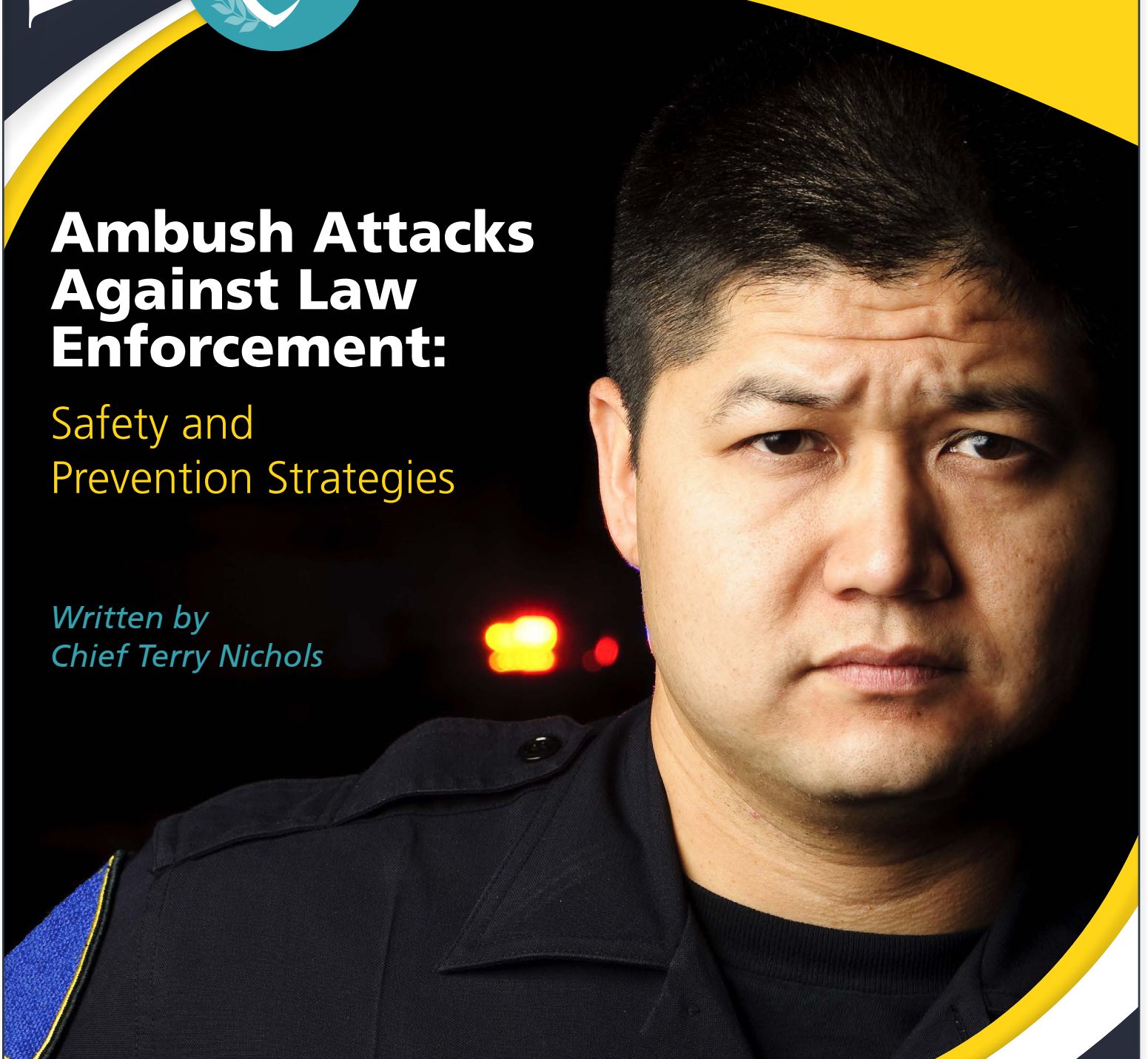
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Ambush Attacks Against Law Enforcement:

Safety and
Prevention Strategies

*Written by
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Defining Ambush Attacks

On May 15, 2017, the Federal Bureau of Investigation released the 2016 preliminary statistics for Law Enforcement Officers Killed in the Line of Duty. These statistics show that 66 law enforcement officers were feloniously killed in the line of duty and that 17 of these officers were killed in ambush attacks.¹ Ambush attacks also were responsible for multiple serious injuries to officers and others. This article will provide strategies to prevent ambush attacks and keep officers safe if attacked.

In a 2015 study by the U.S. Department of Justice, Community Oriented Policing Services (COPS) Office, an ambush is defined as a “planned surprise attack on a human target.” For official reporting purposes, there is no single, agreed-upon definition in the law enforcement profession. The simple definition above can be expanded specifically for ambushes against law enforcement. First, an ambush could be considered a premeditated attack involving some degree of planning and then a calculated execution of the plan. Second, an ambush could be a surprise or spontaneous attack in reaction to an event. This event could be resisting an imminent arrest, evading an arrest, or interaction with law enforcement officers or some other immediate-triggering event.²

For the purposes of this article, we will focus on the first or “planned attack” scenario, although many of the discussion points apply to spontaneous attacks as well. According to the COPS Office,

since 2001, approximately 200 ambush-style attacks have occurred each year against law enforcement officers—involving all types of ambushes and all types of weapons and injury patterns—ranging from no injuries to multiple officer deaths.

The following are reports of some high-profile ambush attacks on law enforcement personnel that convey a sense of the nature and types of ambush attacks.



July 17, 2016—Six Baton Rouge, Louisiana, area police officers were shot and three were killed. The ambushed officers were responding to a call of a suspicious man with a rifle.³

July 7, 2016—Officers with the Dallas, Texas, Police Department and surrounding agencies were providing security for a protest march in downtown Dallas. A suspect opened fire with a rifle, specifically targeting officers. In this incident, 12 officers were shot and 5 were killed. This was the deadliest incident for law enforcement since the 9/11 attacks.⁴

January 7, 2016—A Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, police officer was ambushed while in his vehicle, after being waved down by the suspect. Although seriously wounded, the officer fired three rounds at the suspect, striking him once.⁵

December 20, 2014—A lone suspect approached a parked New York City Police Department patrol car occupied by two officers and opened fire through the passenger window. Both officers were killed instantly.⁶

In a 2015 study published by the U.S. Department of Justice COPS Office regarding the ambush of police officers, several factors and interesting dynamics of ambushes were discovered. The study examined data from the Law Enforcement Officers Killed and Assaulted (LEOKA) database involving ambushes of 230 officers. Listed below are some of the key points from the study and from the Texas Police Chiefs Association, Officer Safety Committee, VINCIBLE Program (2017)⁷, along with additional mitigation strategies, safety tools, and equipment. In all situations, officers need to know and follow their agencies' standard operating procedures, policies, and training. These are considerations for ambush situations, but they do not supersede agency policies and training.

1. Maintain Situational Awareness

It goes without saying that the best way to survive an ambush attack is to avoid being caught in one from the start. It is always important to maintain your situational awareness, regardless of your location. This is true whether inside your car or out.

If parked in your car, consider leaving the windows down so you can hear whether someone is approaching by foot or vehicle.



If sitting with one or more officers in a public place, such as a restaurant or coffee shop, have a plan. Designate one officer to be looking for suspicious behavior on behalf of the group, and rotate this responsibility as necessary. Law enforcement officers are known for sitting in the corners of these types of businesses with their backs against the wall, especially when alone, just for this reason. In groups, however, it can be easy to get distracted in conversation. If one officer from the group is dedicated simply to keeping his or her eyes up and focused on the surrounding environment, any surprise attack should be recognized early, allowing for a better, planned response.

2. Equip Yourself

If you find yourself in an ambush situation, it is important to be prepared so that you are optimally equipped to survive and respond to the encounter. The most important consideration is always to wear your body armor. In a recent study of ambush attacks, only 75 percent of the officers attacked were wearing body armor. Of all officers attacked, those who were wearing body armor survived more than half of the time (53 percent). Officers who were not wearing body armor survived only 32 percent of the time.

Every officer should carry a tourniquet on his or her person and know how to apply one to him- or herself and others. In addition, your patrol car should have a "go bag" with extra magazines for your duty weapon and patrol rifle, along with extra tourniquets, hemostatic agents, chest seals, pressure bandages, and other casualty care supplies. Without immediate and proper care, uncontrolled hemorrhaging can lead to unconsciousness and death before additional help can arrive. An extra flashlight and visual

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communication devices, such as a strobe light or chem-lights to signal other responders, are also good items to include in a go bag. A go bag should contain the tools and equipment to protect and treat yourself and other officers who may be injured until additional help arrives.

If you exit the vehicle during an ambush, it is a good idea to take your patrol rifle and your go bag with you if you can do so safely.

3. Maintain a Safe Distance

While the idea of getting and maintaining distance as an ambush prevention or a mitigation technique may sound like common sense, certain practical applications can help improve your safety. These are as follows:

When parking in public areas to work on paperwork, monitor traffic, or for any other reason, consider parking in large, well-lighted parking lots and away from buildings.

If a car pulls up or a person approaches on foot, drive away to create some distance before you stop to make contact. This will provide you with a tactical advantage and an opportunity to get out of your vehicle to make the contact.



When driving and conducting routine patrol activities, always stop at least a car length away from an intersection or vehicle in front of you. Leave yourself an "out" so that you can drive out of an ambush if necessary.

During an ambush attack, distance can also be an effective ally. Your goal should be to move away from the attack. Get off the "X" where "X" is the location of the attack! Studies have shown that

officer survival rates increase as the distance from the attacker increases. At a distance of 0 to 5 feet, officers survived 34 percent of the time. At distances of more than 50 feet away from the attacker, officers survived 67 percent of the time.

If you are in your vehicle when an ambush occurs, drive out of and through the ambush if at all possible. Your first instinct is to get out of the vehicle to defend yourself and go after the attacker(s); however, sitting in your vehicle provides very few response options to defend yourself. By driving through the attack, you can move to a tactically advantageous location and prepare a response.

If you are unable to drive forward out of the attack, consider reversing to get out of the "hot zone" (the location where the ambush is occurring). Do not forget that the vehicle you are driving also can be used as a weapon in an urgent circumstance, such as an ambush assault. Damaging your vehicle should not be a consideration at this point. Your life and safety are most important.

4. Seek Cover

During an ambush, seeking hard cover is one of the most important things you can do. This may require exiting your patrol vehicle, since it may become a target. In studies, officers who used cover had significantly higher survival rates (67 percent) compared with officers who did not have or use available cover (38 percent). If you are using your vehicle as cover, make sure that you are standing behind the engine block and/or the wheels, since bullets can penetrate other portions of the vehicle. Remember not to crowd your cover and maintain a safe distance that allows you to view what is occurring and react.

5. Return Fire

If you are unable to avoid the ambush and cannot drive out of it, you must be prepared to engage and return fire. This is true whether you are on foot or seated in your vehicle. A round from a duty handgun will certainly penetrate the patrol car windshield. Contrary to some beliefs, the muzzle of the weapon does not need to be pressed against the glass to penetrate the windshield. Studies show that officers who fired their weapons during an ambush situation were much more likely to survive (68 percent) than officers who did not or never had an opportunity to fire (40 percent).

6. Call for Assistance

Departmental policies and standard operating procedures must be studied and followed in these situations. In many critical tactical situations, officers focus on getting on the radio to call for help during the attack. Taking time to locate the radio microphone, get air time, and get a message out in the middle of an attack could make the difference in your survival. While calling in a threat is important, mitigating the immediate threat and your safety should be considered first.

For an officer who has been attacked in an ambush, it is critical to notify responding units of the “hot zone” and where the attacker is located. This will

help prevent officers from driving or running into the middle of the attack zone. If a patrol car is involved, use the car as a compass to direct responding officers to your location and that of the attacker or where the attacker was stopped. Consider the vehicle as a clock, with the front representing 12 and the rear representing 6. Using this as a reference, notify responding units of your location and the suspect’s, using language such as “I am at 7 o’clock, 25 yards out” or “the suspect is down at 2 o’clock, about 50 yards from the vehicle.”



7. Approach With Caution

Responding to an “officer needs assistance” or “officer down” call is one of the most intense and stressful events an officer will ever experience. Although all officers want to help other officers, especially one who is wounded, extreme caution must be used when responding to an ambush attack call. One of the first considerations that should be made is whether to drive into the area without lights and sirens. The lights and sounds of police vehicles are beacons for ambush attackers. They will hone in on these signals and quickly identify their next targets. Consider coming into the area silently, parking a block or two away, and approaching on foot. Be sure to notify dispatch and grab your patrol rifle and go bag when you deploy.



Do not immediately rush to the location of a downed officer if you are not sure where the threat is located. Attackers may be simply waiting for another officer to come into their sights. Assess the scene, gather as much intelligence as possible, develop a plan to get to the wounded officer, and execute the plan. Security must be established first. The last thing needed is more casualties caused by officers running straight into the same ambush where the first officer was wounded.

8. Administer Aid

Once the attack is repelled or stopped, check for injuries and call for help. It is important to neutralize the threat prior to rendering aid to yourself, other officers, or civilians.

Conclusion

The best ways to prepare for and survive an ambush attack are to maintain situational awareness, equip yourself, maintain a safe distance, seek cover, return fire, call for assistance, use stealth, and administer aid. Ambush attacks on law enforcement officers continue to occur at an alarming rate, killing far too many officers. It is imperative that officers know how to prepare for, avoid, and react to an ambush attack!

Resources

Additional resources on ambush attacks on law enforcement officers and other law enforcement safety, health, and wellness topics are available on the BJA VALOR Spotlight on Safety page.

Please visit www.valorforblue.org/s/sos.

To listen to the VALOR Voices podcast *Ambush Awareness*, visit <https://www.valorforblue.org/Home/VALOR-Interest/Podcasts>.

To view the VALOR training module *Ambush Attacks*, visit <https://www.valorforblue.org/eLearning/AmbushAttacks.aspx>.

To view the VALOR webinar recording *Officer Safety Concerns: Ambush Awareness*, visit https://www.valorforblue.org/eLearning/Webinar_OfficerSafetyConcerns.aspx.

Sources

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Chief Terry A. Nichols

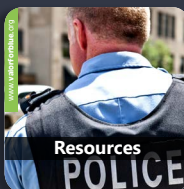
In May 2016, Terry Nichols was appointed as the Chief of Police for the City of Brownwood, Texas, Police Department. Prior to becoming chief, he served as both the Assistant Director (2010–2015) and the Director of Curriculum Development (2015–2016) for the Advanced Law Enforcement Rapid Response Training (ALERT) Center at Texas State University. Chief Nichols is one of three founding members who initiated and led the creation of the Texas State University ALERT Center, which provides tactical training for police officers across the United States and the world in responding to active shooter situations.

Chief Nichols has more than 28 years of law enforcement experience, including 21 years with the San Marcos, Texas, Police Department. His last assignment included commanding the Criminal Investigation Division and the multiagency Hays County special Weapons and Tactics Team, where he served for more than ten years. Chief Nichols worked numerous assignments for the department over his career, including patrol, narcotics, training, and administration.

He is coauthor of the book *Active Shooter Events and Response*, published by CRC Press in June 2013, and coauthor of the article "Active Shooter Events From 2000 to 2012," published in the *FBI Law Enforcement Bulletin* in January 2014. Chief Nichols frequently speaks at national and international conferences on the active shooter threat and response.

Chief Nichols earned a master of science degree in the administration of criminal justice from Southwest Texas State University.

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