Weapons training keeps El Dorado sheriff's deputies prepared for the worst

By Kathryn Reed

TAHOMA – Columbine changed so many things. No longer do officers wait for the SWAT team to arrive. Assault teams of three officers will go find the bad guy.

"If a gunman is killing people, it's our responsibility to engage them," El Dorado County sheriff's Lt. Pete Van Arnum said. "We are constantly evolving our tactics and training."

El Dorado County sheriff's Deputy Matt Harwood trains with his personal gun Aug. 14. Photos/Kathryn Reed

For the past two days the shooting range at D.L. Bliss State Park has been full of El Dorado County deputies getting certified on their weapons – mostly Glock semiautomatic .40-caliber handguns, plus rifles – which all patrol cars have, and some personal weapons.

"Most of our officers are encouraged to carry a handgun off duty," Van Arnum said.

The Carson City IHOP shooting in September 2011 proved that

unarmed military have little recourse.

The 1999 Colorado school shooting provided the old practice of waiting didn't work.

Last month's shooting in Aurora, Colo., at a movie theater proved how easy it is for mentally unstable individuals to acquire weapons.

In his years in law enforcement, Van Arnum has seen an increase in mentally ill people committing mass murder, as well as individuals seeking concealed weapons permits. More people were in his office after last month's shooting for permits.

Sheriff John D'Agostini campaigned on wanting to uphold the Second Amendment – the right to bear arms. This includes concealed weapons. For people living in the county, they must go through Van Arnum to get a weapon. In South Lake Tahoe, the police department regulates them.

The movie theater shooting also points to the need for officers to practice shooting at a suspect's head. Many bad guys now wear chest protection, but not even a gas mask – like the Aurora shooter had – will protect a shooter's head.

Van Arnum isn't one who believes limiting the size of magazines is going to matter much to the person intent on killing. If someone is skilled, they can reload in two to three seconds.

A 12-gauge shotgun is what the Aurora shooter started with. That's the same type of gun some of the deputies were getting certified on Monday and Tuesday.

"Everyone in a rural area has them because they are a bird shooting gun," Van Arnum said. "The are also effective at close range against people."

Even the Olympics – Summer and Winter – have events involving

guns.

While deputies in Tahoe have not been involved in recent shootings, every time they pull their gun out of the holster it’s considered using their weapon.

While this week’s training was about target shooting, that isn’t the only type of training the officers do. A court ruling has said they need to be trained in more realistic scenarios – to be able to run and shoot, reload on the move, take into account if a hostage is involved and those types of events.

Simulators have been brought in before. Those are provided by the state on a rotating basis to departments.

With ammunition costs increasing and budgets being cut, Van Arnum said time at shooting ranges in the area is dwindling.

But training will never end because the possibility of needing to use their weapon is there every hour of the day and night.

“Most police shooting are within 7 yards and are over in two or three rounds. Often it’s at night with poor visibility,” Van Arnum said. “All of these guns have night sights so they glow in the dark.”

Paul Kuhn and Sonny Piazza are the instructors at the outdoor range. As the officers are being told what to do by Piazza, Kuhn explains how it’s necessary to practice shooting from the hip without time to get into a proper stance, line everything up perfectly or even have the second hand on the weapon before firing.

“Someone can be on you from 20 feet before you can draw your firearm,” Kuhn explained. “That’s why we train for it.”

Gradually the guys keep moving back until they are shooting from 20 yards. Two stances on their knees test their ability from those positions.

“Low kneeling is very stable and very uncomfortable. Your foot will fall asleep,” Piazza tells the deputies. But he explains the position will provide them a good base.

Targets are shaped like a soda bottle. They are told to rapidly fire two shots to the body and one to the head. If the suspect doesn’t go down after being shot twice, likely they have body armor on.

Then it’s time to knock the bowling pin over with a bullet as well as obliterate the orange clay target that is dangling.

Finally, the holes in the “bottle” are counted to ensure they have passed this quarterly test.

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