

Choosing the Badge and Gun

Men and women become police officers for many reasons. For some, police work is the realization of a childhood dream born of playing cops and robbers or family tradition. Others become officers because they wish to help people in need, protect innocents from evil, or render justice. I, for example, had a grand plan to save South Central Los Angeles from the persistent gang violence and other crime that had turned the area into a virtual war zone during the 1970s. Less romantic motives for becoming a police officer also abound, as considerations such as the desire for a steady job with benefits, a wish to avoid the drudgery of more traditional occupations, and simple happenstance lead many people into law enforcement. Whatever draws them into police work, most officers come to find that the job they have is quite different from the one they had envisioned. The fact is that most Americans' image of policing comes primarily from popular myths derived from media depictions of police work, which, as noted in the Introduction, provide at best shallow and at worst wildly inaccurate portrayals of the job.

Before coming on the job, most police officers are not aware that shootings are a rare occurrence. Prior to being hired, most officers are just ordinary folk, whose impressions of police work are shaped by the same media forces that frame those of any other member of the general public. So unless a future officer happens to have learned that shootings are rare events from a source such as a friend or family member already in

law enforcement, he or she will likely share the general public's misperception that police officers shoot people on a regular basis.

Although their impressions of the odds that they will end up shooting someone may differ, all would-be officers know that firearms are a tool of the police trade and that there is some possibility that they might one day find themselves in a situation that calls for them to pull the trigger. The fact that being a police officer means that one might be called upon to shoot—and perhaps kill—another human being raises an important question for all who seek the job: Will they be able to do it?

Rooted in the biblical admonition “Thou shalt not kill,” our American systems of law and civic morality stress the sanctity of human life and condemn the act of taking it. Even though our laws and morals have always provided for killing under certain circumstances—during war and in self-defense, for example—such provisions are narrow exceptions to the sweeping norm that we should not take the life of our fellow human beings. This powerful norm is not so easily overcome. Indeed some have argued that the norm reflects an innate human aversion to killing and, consequently, that police officers—like soldiers and anyone else whose job description includes the prospect of the destruction of fellow humans—must actually be taught to overcome their natural predisposition against shedding blood in order for them to take a life.¹

Whatever its source, the sense that one should not kill is strong among Americans, and it can get in the way of doing one's job if one is a police officer. Men and women contemplating careers in law enforcement deal with the fact that the ability to kill is a job requirement in a variety of ways. Some think long and hard about whether they can take a life. I certainly did, spending countless hours reflecting on the issue and discussing the morality of killing with friends, family, professors, pastors, and police officers who shared my religious faith. Other would-be officers resolve the question in short order, and some don't really ponder it at all.

None of the officers I interviewed engaged in the degree of preemployment soul searching that I had, but some—such as the former theology student who took a police job after dropping out of seminary—came close. Several of the men and women that I spoke with had quickly put to rest the question about their ability to kill—some almost as soon it came up in their minds—and the majority never really contemplated the question as they were considering police careers. In fact, the only time many of these officers ever thought about the question was when it was put to them during their job interviews. Law enforcement agencies are keenly aware that some people are not capable of killing, so they try to avoid hiring such people. One way they do this is by asking applicants some variant of this simple question: “Do you believe that you could kill someone if you had to?”

Obviously, each of the eighty men and women who spoke with me had answered this question affirmatively. In this chapter we meet twenty-seven of them. Their stories were selected for two related reasons. The first is that the ways they dealt with the question of killing people before they came on the job cover the spectrum of how the

officers that I interviewed approached the issue. The second is that the paths these officers took to police work are representative of those taken by the larger group. As a result, the stories in this chapter give the reader some idea of the types of journeys that people who aspire to law enforcement careers undertake on their way to an occupation where the job requirements include the ability to kill people.

The stories are presented in three groups, based on how and why the officers got into police work. This approach provides thematic threads that tie the stories together and allows the reader to see how people with similar motivations and backgrounds can have different ideas, attitudes, and expectations about deadly force. The stories begin with those of a set of officers who had a strong personal connection with law enforcement before they came on the job.

Friends and Family

The most common personal link to policing among officers was a parent or sibling who worked in law enforcement. The other sort of personal connection was through a close friend on the job. Officers who had a personal link to police work before they got into it typically possessed more knowledge about what the job entails than did their less-connected peers. As the stories in this section illustrate, however, officers who share similar backgrounds still can travel different paths to the job and possess substantially different perspectives on deadly force.



I was pretty young when I started to think seriously about becoming a cop, seventeen or eighteen. The idea came from my brother, who was already in law enforcement. He encouraged me to pursue it, and I did. I didn't think much about being involved in shootings before I applied for the job. In fact, what first brought the possibility that I might shoot someone to my attention was a question that came up in an oral interview to come on the job. One of the people doing the interviewing asked me, "Do you think you could take somebody's life if you had to?" It kind of set me back a little bit because the questions prior to that had to do with mundane things like why I wanted to become a police officer and my religious beliefs and whatnot. So when the question about killing someone came up, it kind of threw me back a little bit. I had to really think about it. I told the oral board that if I was placed in a position where I had to shoot to save my life or somebody else's that I didn't think I'd have a problem with taking a life, and it was left at that. So that was my first introduction to the idea that I might have to shoot someone.



I really started to consider becoming a cop when I was in high school. My dad was in law enforcement, but when I was young, he never would talk about things that were going on or things that had happened. When I was older and went to the station with him, the guys were always having fun and the stuff that was going on looked exciting. So police work looked exciting, and that was probably the main reason I got interested in it. When I told my mom I wanted to become a cop, she was concerned and proud at the same time. My dad tried to talk me out of it, but it was kind of a halfhearted attempt. His attitude was like, "It's a great job. I don't really want you to do it. But you'll love it." I went to a junior college for a couple of years, played some football there, then transferred to Randall State University and after a year there came on the sheriff's department when I was twenty-one.

The notion that I might have to shoot somebody was always in the back of my mind, from the time I first decided to become a cop. I knew that that was part of the job. I had gone on some ride-alongs with friends that were on the department, and I knew from that that I wanted to work the faster places. Those places had a lot of shootings, so I knew that that was part of the game, that getting in a shooting was a real possibility.



Probably about a year before I came onto the force was the first time I thought about becoming a police officer. I was working for this import company that was facing a possible bankruptcy. My brother—who'd gotten on the force two years before—said my military background would probably help me get onto the police force if I were interested. I gave it some consideration and got accepted when I eventually applied.

I'd gone to college right out of high school and accumulated about ninety credit hours before I joined the army for a two-year hitch. I was a combat medic. Went overseas for a few months as part of a multinational peacekeeping force south of Beirut, Lebanon, called Operation Bright Star. It was fairly intense duty, but I was never involved in any combat. It was usually several miles away.

When I got out of the army, I came home, worked odd jobs, helped my dad in the family grocery business for a while, then found something that looked more promising at the import company that ended up facing bankruptcy. I decided to go on a ride-along with my brother when he mentioned that I should consider taking a police job. Nothing

happened until the end of the shift, when he stopped by on a good shooting that involved a bad drug deal. The guy had half his face blown off. I had thought the ugliness of police work would not appeal to me, but it looked like I could handle the blood and gore, so I said, "This is for me." I liked the atmosphere, being around a police station, in a police car, the adrenaline involved. Plus I saw that the police department was structured very similar to that of a military environment, and that's something that I really enjoyed previously. In fact, I'd have stayed in the military for longer than two years, but I wanted to be near my family. I'm of Chinese descent and family is important to us. Besides that, I'm used to Mom's cooking, and you don't find much good Chinese food out in the sticks or in another country.

I gave some serious thought to the issue of using deadly force before I came on the department because I was involved in a shooting when I was eighteen years old. It was a hijacking at our family store. I saw the suspect come in, put a gun to my dad's head, lay him down, and shoot him execution-style. I witnessed the whole thing. I was standing by where my dad hid one of his pistols, and I pulled it out and shot the suspect after he fired a shot at me and missed. He got away, but I know I hit him because they recovered a bullet that had a lot of blood on it in the front door. I figured that round went through his arm because he dropped the money. I chased him out of the store, and when he was about half a block away, I shot him in the back. He actually did a flip before he fell; then the getaway car came and dragged him away.

I thought my dad was dead, but it turned out that the bullet the hijacker fired went through his ribs. The gun was a cheap .22, where the cylinder was misaligned with the barrel. A piece of junk. I swore up and down that the gun was raised over my dad's head, but he moved or something just when the guy pulled the trigger, and the bullet passed through two ribs, missed all the organs, and exited.

From that experience, I knew I could shoot someone, but I also thought about some other stuff regarding shootings. Besides my brother, I had some friends who came on the department before me, and they always told me about the liabilities involved. They said that every time you pull the trigger, you've got the chief's name on every bullet that comes out of your gun. I also thought about how I would act in a bad situation as a police officer because I'm not really the John Wayne type, the aggressive type. I'm a pretty laid-back person. More importantly, I didn't want to choke in a situation where I could get

somebody else innocent killed, whether it'd be a civilian or my partner. I didn't have a problem with the notion of hurting someone. I was just concerned about whether I could react the way that I'm supposed to.

When I was a young kid growing up in the Midwest, my father had a very close friend named Ray Underwood, who was a police officer. He was a childhood hero of mine, so I started thinking about following him and becoming a cop when I was pretty young. He had been in the marines, and when we'd go over to visit, he'd show my brother and me his gun. He even gave us a bayonet he had from the Second World War. When I was nine or ten, he got in a horrendous shooting while handling a disturbance call at a local hospital one night. He took several rounds, but he put the suspects down. He stayed on the job for a long time after that, so I was always impressed with old Ray Underwood.

Even though I'd had a family friend who was shot when I was pretty young, I don't think that the seriousness of shootings registered when I was a kid. Where it really registered to me was when I was in the Marine Corps overseas in the Vietnam incident. I was in a force reconnaissance unit, a small group that would go out snooping and pooping around in the bush to bring back intelligence so the regular units could kick off a mission. Being in force recon was the best thing that ever happened to me in my life because I got intensive training and discipline. I went through all sorts of schools: guerrilla warfare, SCUBA, jump school, maneuvers over and over again about movement in the bush with a small group of people. I did all sorts of stuff like that for a year before heading overseas.

All that training helped keep me alive in Vietnam. That, plus when you're in force recon, you're not just one of the grunts. Those guys got hit terribly over there, but when you're in force recon, you're out there calling the shots. We had immediate air on station, immediate on-calls always set up to have artillery coming to our aid, and if we really got into the heat, we could get an emergency extraction. We'd just move to an LZ, a landing zone, and they would get you out of there. So it was a damn good thing as far as survival to be in a recon unit. We had a lot of contacts in the year I spent in Vietnam, but nobody from my unit ever got killed. We did OK, but we also ran missions where we set up as a reactionary force, and sometimes on those we had to go out and pick up the bodies of dead Americans. From that, I learned about what deadly force is all about and what guns can do.

I came back stateside in March of 1970. I put in my application with the police department in May, got released from the corps in late July, and started the academy two weeks later. So six months out of the bush and I was in the police academy.



Being that I grew up in a police family, I was pretty young when I first thought about becoming a cop, probably ten or eleven. My grandpa started the tradition back in the early '40s, right around '42. My dad got in it during the '60s. Then my sister and I came on the job in the late '80s. I'd gone away to college, came back from my first year at college, got a job with the Communications Division, and realized that police work was pretty much what I wanted to do. So I went back to school, got three more semesters under my belt, graduated, and came back. Two weeks after I came back from graduation, I started the academy.

When I was growing up, I never really thought about fights or shootings or anything like that. We didn't have *Cops*, and we didn't have *Real Stories of the Highway Patrol* on TV. That's something that has been so much more recent. I was a typical kid. I grew up playing cops and robbers and good guy–bad guy, and we had the cap guns and if some guy snuck around the corner of a building, we'd pop one at him. "Bang! You're dead" kind of thing. So we dealt with it, but we never had to deal with the seriousness of it. It's like these programs nowadays where they show chases and all this action-type stuff, but you don't see any of the aftermath of it. You don't see any report writing, the interviews that take place. You don't see really any of the investigation stuff. You see all the fun stuff, and that's what we dealt with as kids, we dealt with the fun stuff. We didn't have to deal with all the paperwork and stuff afterwards. So even though we did deal with it to an extent, we never really got in-depth with it.

Neither my dad nor my granddad were ever involved in a shooting, and they never talked about shooting people. When Dad would come home from work, I can remember he'd take his belt off and he'd set it on his dresser, and he left his gun in his holster. He very rarely would lock it up unless we left on vacation, and we all knew you don't touch the gun. If I wanted to touch it, I had to ask him first, and there'd better be a good reason why I wanted to touch it. So I asked him a few times, and he'd unload it and he'd sit down with me and say, "The bullets go in this way and this is how the barrel turns," stuff like that, because in those days they had the .38s. So my sister and I

were curious about it and he never hid it from us, but we also knew that it was not a toy. I knew what it was capable of, but I guess I just never really thought about what it would do. So because Grandpa and Dad were never involved in anything, they never really talked about shootings, and looking at my father's gun was the extent of our dealings about that sort of thing.

I do remember when my dad was working the detective bureau, he went out one night to help a friend of his who owned a bar. They were having a problem with some people coming in and robbing the neighborhood bars, so my dad grabbed his 20-gauge shotgun, put it in the little bag, and went down and sat at the bar. I thought, "Boy, it would be terrible if this guy came in there." I was hoping that if he did that my dad could get him before he shot my dad, and I remember thinking, "I hope Dad comes home tonight." Luckily, that night everything went off without a hitch. There were no problems at the bar, and he never, as far as I know, ever went back. And that was the only time I ever worried about anything that he ever did. But like I said, neither he nor my grandpa were ever involved in any type of officer-involved shooting, so I never really thought anything about them.

Youthful Ambition

Kids with friends or family in police work are not the only ones who dream of a career in law enforcement. The stories in this section show how deep the desire to become a police officer can run and how individuals who set their minds on police work early in life can take quite different paths to realizing their youthful aspirations. Where deadly force is concerned, the stories once again demonstrate that future officers who share some sort of common bond can have very different approaches to the prospect of killing people.



I decided to become a cop when I was seven. I was always getting into my parents' car and acting like I was chasing robbers. I even made a pretend *Kojak* light for that. I'd also make my little brother be a bad guy and chase him around the backyard. As I got older and started spending time around the police department in the city where I grew up, I started to realize that it wasn't all fun and games, that officers really do shoot people sometimes. That happened when I joined the police explorers when I was in high school. They had a program where we got to ride along with officers on Friday and Saturday nights, so through that I became good friends with the officers down there. One

of them, Sam Wayne, got into two shootings within about a year, so I saw that shootings were obviously something that was part of the job.

I decided I didn't want to work in the place where I grew up, that I wanted to work in a big city. I looked into a few places and ended up coming here. At the time I hired on, the city had a reputation of having some pretty rough places, so I figured that there was a good possibility that I would have to shoot somebody someday. Having given it quite a bit of thought before I came on, I was satisfied that I'd be able to shoot. If you have to, you have to. It's part of the job.



From the time I was very little, my ambition in life was to be either a veterinarian or a law enforcement officer. I've always loved animals, and police work always fascinated me. I had two Saint Bernards when I was growing up, so that's where the love for animals came from. The fascination with law enforcement just came from watching officers. I remember when I was a small kid, an officer came to school to talk with us about different things. I can't say I understood everything he was talking about, but it just grabbed me. He had my complete attention and my total respect. I liked that. I liked that people were willing to pay attention to him just because of his job. That was when I was a real little kid, and as I got older, that sense of awe just stuck with me.


Another thing that drew me to policing was that it seemed like a real active job. I've never been one to sit back and watch. I've always just liked to do things, and from what I saw of police work, it was clear that it wasn't the type of job where you sit behind a desk and punch in a card. It seemed like when I saw some cops, they were always doing something different, always dealing with different people, never the same thing. That fascinated me. When I was younger, I could watch cops doing their jobs all day, even if it was just writing out a little ticket. Plus I saw that they were almost always working together. I rarely saw just one officer doing something. It was usually a group of guys, doing their work together. I liked that because I played sports all my life, and the idea of working together for a common goal appealed to me. As I got older, my interest in being a vet declined, and my desire to become a police officer kept growing.

I wanted to be a cop so bad that I went down to apply with the PD as soon as I got out of high school. They told me to come back when I was twenty-one, so I did. I took the test, passed it, and went through the rest of the hiring procedures until I came to the physical. They knocked me out of the process because they found something wrong

with my back, where one of my vertebrae was a bit off center. They discovered that the problem was something I was born with, not from an injury. But that didn't matter. They told me there were no ifs, ands, or buts; I couldn't come on. They did tell me that there was an appeal process, but I didn't bother with it because I didn't know any better. I just took the test a bunch of times over the next several years—at least five or six—and every time I'd pass, and every time I'd get rejected because of my back.

During that time, I worked a bunch of different jobs to support myself. I worked for Montgomery Wards, Coors Beer Company, and held some other jobs while I took some college courses. I drove a truck for a uniform company here in town for a couple of years, then started my own lawn and tree-trimming business on the side. That got to be pretty good, so I quit those other jobs and just did lawn care full-time. I was about ready to give up on becoming a police officer, but my dad suggested that I try it again. He told me that a buddy of his had told him that the PD had changed some of the hiring requirements. He figured the physical might be one of them. I was doubtful about that, but I took the test again anyway. I went through the whole process again, and when I got called for the physical, I made it through. I didn't know how it happened, and I didn't ask, I didn't question it. Just kept my mouth shut, made it through the last step, and got into the academy in June of '88. Once I got hired, I let my lawn business go and just concentrated on police work.

I never really gave much thought to shootings before I came on the job, but I was raised to take care of myself, so I knew I'd do whatever I had to if it came to that. That came from my dad. He was a boxer, and he got me involved in it when I was seven. I grew up in a real tough part of town, and my dad always told me from day one, he said, "Don't ever go looking for trouble, never. If you can, walk away from a fight, never look for trouble. But if someone is trying to hurt you or your family, you do whatever is necessary to take care of yourself and your family." So I've always thought that if someone was trying to hurt me bad enough, I wouldn't hesitate to kill them. I never really sat down before I got hired and thought about the issue of shooting someone. It was just engraved in the back of my mind that I would do whatever was necessary to take care of myself and my family, whether it be deadly force, or whatever.



I'd say I was about twelve years old when I first thought about becoming a cop. I think it was from watching TV and seeing LAPD out in my neighborhood doing their jobs. I grew up in a bad area, but the cops always treated me fairly. I had some positive contact with cops when I was growing up, and their job looked interesting, so from a young age I always felt like being a police officer was what I wanted to do. I think when I was twelve, the idea of getting into law enforcement was more of a fantasy, and then it grew into something more structured as I got older. By the middle to the end of high school, I decided that I really wanted to become a policeman.

I knew I couldn't be a cop until I was twenty-one, so about two or three days after high school graduation, I joined the Marine Corps. I stayed in the Marine Corps until right before I got on the department. In the marines, I worked the Presidential Honor Guard and security detail for President Carter. We were stationed in Washington, D.C., at Marine Barracks 8th and I, which is the oldest post in the Marine Corps. That's where they do all the ceremonial stuff. Then I worked the White House and also Camp David. So I worked different security assignments.

We carried loaded weapons and we got training on the rules of engagement, but I didn't think I'd ever have to fire on anyone. I knew that I was there more for show and that if I ended up in a shooting situation, the Secret Service would be putting holes in the guy before I got any rounds off. I mean, we weren't the primary defense for the president. Like I said, my position was more for show.

The only time we would be primary is in the case of a nuclear or terrorist attack. In that case, our actual primary duty was security for the president. For instance, if the president had to be evacuated, we'd land, secure the perimeter, the president would come in with the Secret Service, some of us would go to the bunkers with the president, and when he came out we would be his security force because the Secret Service wouldn't be big enough to handle that. We trained for stuff like that, but I didn't think it was ever really going to happen.

I think the first time I gave any serious thought to the possibility of getting in a shooting was right before I went into the academy. I had applied to the police department when I was still in the marines, done all the testing, cleared the background and all that, so I went almost straight from the marines to the PD. Just before I entered the academy, an officer from a neighboring department was shot and killed. He was

a young guy just out of the military and still in training when it happened, so I identified with him. That got me thinking about shootings and the possibility of shooting someone. But up to that time, I never really thought about shootings. I knew that officers got into shootings, but I'd never really thought about me personally getting in a shooting. Up till then, my focus had been on working hard to get on the job.

I've always been pretty sure I was going to do something either military or police related since I was a little kid. I'm not sure why. I guess the activity, the excitement. There has also always been the feeling within me that there are bad people, evil people, out there doing harm and killing people and that they need to be stopped. I have been around firearms all my life, started shooting competitive shotguns at a young age, so I've been an expert shooter since childhood. I've always felt that maybe that talent made me somewhat responsible to stop the bad people, that maybe I needed to be a sheriff or a policeman or something because that was one thing that I was good at. My parents taught me the difference in right and wrong, and since I can protect people with my area of expertise, I felt that maybe I should.

I read a lot as a kid. I read a lot of everything, from cowboy books, to quite a few police books, to a lot of spy novels. I knew from all this reading and from watching occasional news pieces that there were some seriously bad, evil people out there and that there was a potential that I would come into contact with them. I knew that I would be able to handle it. I never questioned my ability to take somebody's life if it was a situation of where it was them or me, or them or my family, or them or some innocent person they were trying to victimize. So I always felt that I would be able to shoot somebody if it was necessary.

I wanted to be a police officer from when I was in junior high, or even before then. I remember watching *Adam 12* and just being fascinated with the idea of being a police officer. I think it was the responsibility of it, the pride involved, getting to work with people and to help people in need. I was also drawn to the excitement. I liked the idea of not knowing what's gonna happen when you go to work, of having to think on your feet and react. Also, I looked up to police officers, and I hoped that people would look up to me and that I'd be a positive example to people when I became a cop.

I don't recall ever thinking about shootings when I was young, but I did think about physical confrontations. The possibility of that. I worked on preparing myself physically and staying in shape. I remember that even at a very young age I'd go out and run for a certain length of time, then do pull-ups and push-ups. I've always been pretty small—thin boned and things like that—so I was working on my strength and building myself physically for the job from a young age.

Then I became a Christian when I was in high school, and I had a period of time in my mind where I felt that my calling in life was to be a church planter. I got a B.A. in philosophy and then started seminary. I planned to get a graduate degree in theology and go plant churches over in Australia among the Aborigines, or somewhere else in some Third World country, and I guess—had things kept going the way they were—that's what I would have done. But I had to support myself and seminary was very difficult. I couldn't handle classes and a full-time job because I worked more on school in that one semester in seminary than I did my entire four years of college before that. It was tough. I realized I couldn't do that and work at the same time, so I decided to fall back on the thing that I loved as a child—law enforcement. I said, "I'll give it a try." Never looked back since.

I thought quite a bit about the issue of killing people after I became a Christian. I remember that there were times during high school and college that I felt that I could never shoot anybody. Then, at some point, I realized, "Hey, if you gotta do it, you could do it." I wouldn't want to do it, but if I had to, I believed that I could. I think I just realized as I matured that life is not perfect, and we all have to react to things that life brings to us. Whether I was a cop, or I was just a citizen in my house and someone came in there to assault my family, I would do whatever was necessary to protect my family. I realized that protecting my family is the same thing that a cop does. He doesn't just protect himself, he's protecting the citizens. So I felt that I could do it.



I first got interested in law enforcement during my junior year in high school when I was called into the counseling office. At first, I thought I was in some kind of trouble, but when I got to the office, the counselor asked me what I was going to do when I got out of high school. I hadn't given it any thought. I knew my parents wanted me to go to college, but as far as career choice I had no idea. When I told the counselor that, he handed me this big pamphlet about a program called the

Regional Occupational Program that allowed high school students to get credit for taking occupational classes and working at these different places. He told me to look the pamphlet over to see if there was anything that interested me.

As I looked through it, the only jobs that interested me were things that would get me out of the building. I didn't want to be cooped up. I was a very active kid who lost interest quickly. In school, I found myself daydreaming, my mind wandering, stuff like that. So I didn't want a job where I'd have to be inside. Then I saw that there was this class on law enforcement/private security, and out of curiosity I decided to check it out. The class really piqued my interest because I learned that law enforcement was something that would get me outside a lot. So I thought, "Hey, that looks pretty good." It really interested me, and that's basically how I decided to get into law enforcement.

As I was contemplating a career in police work, I kind of asked myself about whether I thought I could shoot somebody. My dad had been a marine pilot in both World War II and Korea, so the issue of killing people wasn't foreign to me. He had also raised me to have a self-protection kind of mind-set. He taught me what to do if we had an intruder enter the home, stuff like that. I took it from there and decided that I could shoot somebody. So from an early age, I thought I could shoot if I had to.

Changing Jobs

Some officers become interested in policing later in life. In this section, we meet several officers who came into police work when they decided that a career change was in order, and we hear how they approached the prospect of having to shoot someone.



I got into law enforcement in my early twenties. I was working in the communications unit of a hospital's helicopter ambulance program, doing some PR and marketing coordination as well as managing calls. I was getting tired of that job, so I went down to the city hall to see what types of jobs they had to offer. I signed up for a bunch of things: communications dispatcher, lifeguard, some other stuff, and police officer. The police department called me up, I started going through the process, and it just snowballed from there.

I didn't really know what the job entailed, but as I went through the hiring process, it looked more and more interesting. The pay and

fringe benefits looked good, but the things that appealed to me most were being able to work outdoors and being able to come into work wearing things like sweats and change into something. I know it sounds funny, but I'm a fairly laid-back, casual type of person and that really appealed to me.

Prior to getting hired, I never really thought about shootings. We had guns around the house when I was growing up. My father liked to hunt, but I didn't like it at all. He'd make me go sometimes, but I didn't care for it, so I was never big on guns. Now I did have a handgun when I got older, but it was just for target shooting. I'd shoot at an indoor range maybe once or twice a year. That was it. I didn't carry it around or even have it loaded at the house. I just had it for occasional target practice. The only time I can remember giving any thought to the notion of shooting someone was during the captain's interview, one of the final things in the hiring process. The guy asked me about how I would feel if I had to take a life; would I be able to do it? I obviously told him I could do it, because I knew that was what he wanted to hear. I mean, anyone would know that that's the right answer if you want to be a cop.



I got introduced to law enforcement-type work while I was in college. I was pursuing a broadcasting degree, wanted to get into some type of broadcasting or journalism. I took a part-time job as a security guard to get some extra money and I really enjoyed it. I got burned out on college, got tired of being poor, so I dropped out for a while to work full-time. I had grown up in a small rural area, so I decided to move to the big city, see what kind of job I could find. I had a friend that was going to college here, so I stayed with him for a few days. As I was looking around, I saw this big billboard that said, "Join the Police Department." I automatically correlated it with my security guard work and thought, "Hey, I know some guys who are cops. I could do that." So I decided to give it a try, thinking I'd do it for a couple of years maybe, then go back to college and finish my broadcasting degree. But I fell in love with the job, and I'm still here twenty years later.

Before I came on the job, I thought big-city cops got into shootings all the time. I fully expected to come here and get involved in a shooting before too long. I also thought that maybe I'd be shot. That crossed my mind a lot. I'd say the biggest thing that got me thinking that way was cop shows on TV. Those guys were in shootings every

episode. Another thing was some stuff the guy I was staying with said. He tried to talk me out of joining. He told me that cops get killed here all the time. I remember thinking that maybe I ought to rethink this police job stuff, and then I thought it can't really be that dangerous. But I still thought that maybe I'd get shot. Then, after a little while on the streets, I came to understand that shootings don't happen very often. I never went back to college, and after twenty years I still haven't been shot.



I was in the military, United States Army, assigned to a specialized recon platoon in an airborne unit. Then I got hurt and couldn't do that anymore. I knew that I wanted to do something with a paramilitary organization because I enjoyed that environment, so I thought about law enforcement. When I got out, the first thing I did was put in for police jobs. I applied to three departments—two sheriff's departments and the city PD. I got hired by all three on the same day but decided to go with the city. One of the county agencies told me, "You have to work the jail five years minimum." The other told me, "Probably five years in the jail." But the city said, "You'll be on the street right away." So I said, "That's where I'm going."

I had reconciled myself to the possibility that I might have to kill somebody even before I got into the military. When I decided to join up, I knew that there was always a possibility of war or skirmishes, police actions, and stuff like that. I knew that I could be involved in a shooting. I thought about it: "Would I be able to do it?" I made my mind up that if I was going to do that type of work that I was going to be able to do it. I'm a survivor, and the decision I made before the military just carried over to police work.



I first started thinking about becoming a cop probably just a couple years before I came on the department. Part of it was that my husband applied for the department, and I kept being told that I had a better chance than he did. People told us that he was too white, too male, and since I'm American Indian, I'd have a better chance of getting on. The other part of it was that I'd always been interested in law enforcement, the legal aspect of it, the investigative part of it. My father's a lawyer, and I always liked the law. I was fascinated with it. I thought a long time ago about maybe being a lawyer but didn't really like lawyers too much so decided, no, that wasn't what I wanted to do. But I never

thought I'd go into law enforcement. Never really even considered it. Then, when I kept being told that I'd have a better chance to get hired than my husband, it just sort of made me think, "Well, OK. I'm in for a career change anyway. So why not?"

I was in my late thirties, working at a medical office when I decided to apply to the police department. It took about a year from when I applied till they hired me. During that year, I was scared to death about whether I could get through the academy because of my age. I had always been athletic, but I'd had a kid, and I had never been the type to run or do all the physical things that you hear about in the academy. I never really thought about the possibility of shootings. My main concern was just getting through all the testing and all the interviews and getting ready for the physical part of the academy.

I joined the Marine Corps on my seventeenth birthday, and I had planned on making it a career. When I had about ten years in, I was teaching a rappel class for a regional SWAT academy that was using the Marine Corps rappel tower. Everybody was telling their war stories; we had our war stories and they had their war stories, so it wasn't like it was that big of a deal. Then they started talking about working ten hours a day, four days a week, and anything over ten hours is time and a half. That got me thinking because I worked thirty days a month, twenty-four hours a day, and always got paid the same. When they talked about making \$40,000 or more a year, I said, "I'm in the wrong profession." So about four months before my commitment was up, I applied to several law enforcement agencies and had a job waiting for me when I got out of the corps.

Before I became a cop, I never really thought about shootings because I was with the pretty active unit in the Marine Corps, and my primary MOS was all combat-related stuff. We practiced and trained a lot. Did close-quarter combat training, did hand to hand; we did all kinds of stuff that dealt with more violence than what I thought the police were dealing with. I just thought it would be a good career because you can promote, make a good income, you don't really have to worry about layoffs, issues like that. There were other issues too, like being in a profession where I could make a difference. But I thought it would definitely be an easy transition from the military to law enforcement.

I had a regular job as a lab tech in a clinical laboratory in a hospital when I decided to apply for a job as a police officer. I was teaching music and working as a freelance musician for extra money. My wife was pregnant with my first daughter, and I knew I had to move into something where I was making more money and had a more secure future. I saw a recruitment poster. The PD happened to be hiring at the time. After I looked into the salary and benefits and what have you, it seemed like the thing to do. I didn't have a major commitment to law enforcement. Now I had thought about it on and off when I was a kid because my granddad was a firefighter. I thought about either becoming a firefighter or a policeman, like probably most all kids do. But I hadn't really thought about becoming a cop for a good many years before I saw that recruitment poster.

When I looked into getting on the PD, it crossed my mind a little bit that I could end up shooting someone, but it was never a real big deal to me. I grew up hunting. My dad's from eastern Kentucky, the good-ole-boy mold, and I grew up with a gun in my hands from the time I was very young, three or four years old. He'd take me out and teach me how to shoot a .22 and stuff, so I grew up with guns. I understood that deadly force was a very real part of the job and the potential was there. I knew what police officers did, and I knew that the possibility of having to shoot somebody was part of it, but I thought about it only in passing. I understood it was a serious part of the job, but it was just never a major issue for me.



The men and women who choose police work bring with them an array of ideas, hopes, dreams, and desires; a variety of backgrounds and motives; and a diversity of perspectives on that most important aspect of policing: the power over life and death. Whatever they have been, done, thought, or felt in the past, once they become cops, they will be counted among that small number of Americans who have legal sanction to take life in a split second. The next chapter deals with how the transformation from ordinary citizen to police officer is accomplished.