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*Into the Kill Zone* was published in 2004, receiving much in the way of advanced praise by the likes of such people as James J. Fyfe (Deputy Commissioner of Training with the New York Police Department), Chief Darryl F. Gates of the Los Angeles Police Department, and Ann Rule, the popular crime novel author. Being familiar with Klinger’s research, I picked up a copy in early 2005, but the book struck me as being more in line with past publications such as *COPS*, by Mark Barker, and *What COPS Know*, by Connie Fletcher: books that tell interesting stories about policing, but without a research focus—the type of book that ends up on my summer reading list. In fact, it did just that, as I found time to read it over the summer of 2005. I must admit I was somewhat taken aback, for although the advertising and advanced praise of the book were clearly directed toward the cop junkies, the book was some of the best qualitative research I have read in a while. Klinger has taken a topic—police use of deadly force—that seemed to be well-trodden ground, and managed to explore it with such great depth that there would now appear to be a number of avenues of research available in the subject. Klinger also seems to be the right person, in more ways than one, to have explored this particular topic.

Klinger is a former police officer with the Los Angeles Police Department, who was involved in a deadly force encounter in 1981. He recounts this story in the introduction to the book, quickly capturing the reader’s attention. He remained in policing until 1985, at which time he pursued his Masters, Ph.D., and then his current faculty position at the University of Missouri-St. Louis. Trained as a sociologist, and long removed from policing and his own deadly force encounter, Klinger was able to return to the topic of police use of deadly force with a researcher’s viewpoint, but the enviable credibility of an officer who has used deadly force. This gives him weight with both practitioners and researchers.

While the book does at times read like the “true cop stories” books, creating a very enjoyable read, Klinger provides high-quality qualitative research. He is clearly familiar with the literature on deadly force, and his methodology is sound, interviewing approximately 80 officers, covering over 113 incidents, with appropriate follow-ups. The division of chapters and topics provide a nice progression that fully explores not just the deadly force encounters but everything leading up to those rare police events.

Chapter one is titled, “Choosing the Badge and Gun,” and is a relatively brief chapter. Here Klinger looks to the background of the officers who would eventually end up in a deadly force encounter where they were forced to take the life of a fellow human being. Unlike some stylized portrayals in news media, popular culture films and television dramas, the men and women who found themselves in these encounters did not have a blood-thirsty background but essentially lived very normal lives. They grew up in a variety of settings, became interested in police work at an early age, and after graduating from high school, the military, or college, they joined a local police department. What was most interesting about this chapter was Klinger’s inquiry into the point in the officers’ careers where they realized that they may be called upon one day to use deadly force. He wanted to know at what point the individuals wrestled with the question of whether
or not they could kill someone if they had to in order to protect their own lives or the lives of others. What was interesting was that most acknowledged this reality of policing, but none really dwelled on the issue. Most felt if they had to, they could, but it was not something they relished. Having been a former police officer myself, I could easily relate to their response, as I too recognized that it may happen, but I never dwelled on the possibility.

Chapter two is titled, "Basic Training," and its focus was on the experiences of these men and women as they went through the police academy, field training, and their first encounter with extreme violence. Klinger briefly covers the interviewees’ responses to how each of these facets of police officer training changed them and moved them more toward the realization of the seriousness of police work. For some it was the academy, teaching them about the use of deadly force and training scenarios. For others it was what they witnessed in responding to calls in their field training. Still others found it consisted of calls they responded to once they were released on their own, no longer under the watchful eye of a Field Training Officer. This brief chapter reveals what much of the literature on policing has previously explained, from entering the police academy to working as a rookie working the street; these early experiences have a profound impact on the behaviors and attitudes of these young officers.

The third chapter, and one I found most innovative in the exploration of the use of deadly force, was titled, "Holding Fire." In these interviews, Klinger asked the men and women who had been engaged in deadly force situations where they did fire their weapons, if they had ever been in an encounter where they could have fired their service weapon, but did not and why. While often the media and popular culture portray the use of deadly force as police officers acting without restraint, these stories demonstrated that often officers do hold their fire, even when they may be justified in shooting. This was a unique perspective on the police use of deadly force. On a personal level, this chapter resonated with me the most, as my first night in field training I was faced with a deadly force encounter, and despite seeing a 9mm firearm and beginning to pull the trigger, I did not fire because the gun was never pointed directly at me, and something about the individual did not indicate he wanted to harm me. Although in the debriefing I was told that had I taken a shot I would have been entirely justified, I would have shot, and possibly killed, an off-duty police officer from my department. The chapter gives encouraging and refreshing examples of officers who displayed life-saving restraint in deadly force situations.

“Pulling the Trigger” is the fourth and longest chapter. These vignettes of deadly force encounters highlight the complexities and varied responses of officers to deadly force encounters. The stories range from rookie officers finding themselves faced with deadly force encounters to SWAT team call-outs, involving officers who are well trained to respond to these types of situations. Perhaps some of the most interesting aspects of this chapter come in the last two sections, the first a series of three separate deadly force situations experienced by one officer and the second a deadly force encounter experienced by several officers with vastly varying perspectives.

The fifth chapter, “When the Smoke Clears," explores the aftermath of the foregoing deadly force encounters from the officers’ perspectives. It details the toll that the taking of a human life has on these officers and how they responded to the press, psychological services, difficulties they had with their families, recurring nightmares, and the increased level of stress, especially when returning to duty. Although all of the officers reacted very differently to their own deadly force encounters, each of them was profoundly impacted by their encounter.

Klinger’s epilogue is but two pages and for the most part lets readers draw their own conclusions about police use of deadly force. While this is highly effective stylistically and does not bog the book down in any academic discourse, it is also perhaps the book’s greatest shortcoming as a work of qualitative research. This lack of scholarly conclusion was perhaps intended to appeal to the "true police story" readers, making the book more marketable. Yet at the same time this may enhance the appeal of the book for use in the university classroom, as the lack of a definitive discussion and conclusion allows for more open class discourse about Klinger’s results and the conclusions to be drawn. To that end, I would highly recommend this book for use as either a supplement in a policing course, where the instructor intends to explore certain topics with more depth; in a course on current police issues and/or policies; or in a special topics course
dealing specifically with police use of deadly force. Also, despite the lack of a conclusion that would have made this an exemplary piece of qualitative research, the book could be used in a research methods to discuss qualitative research methods.

One other advantage I see to this book is the opening up of fresh insight into police deadly force encounters and new avenues for research. The aspect of police deadly force encounters where the officer did not fire makes one wonder how often this phenomenon occurs, not only among officers who have had deadly force encounters, but those to date who have not. In addition, the qualitative method employed may very well lend itself to the exploration of other areas of police research that also have an extensive body of literature, such as police vehicle pursuits: interviews with officers who have had vehicle pursuits go well and those who have experienced pursuits that ended up either causing the death of those being pursued, the death or injury of a fellow officer, or the death and injury of innocent bystanders. Perhaps also the exploration of an area of policing that is not nearly so well-defined in the literature, such as foot pursuits by officers.

References

